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School Counselors' Perceptions Of Their Role In Assisting Students With College Preparedness

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SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN ASSISTING STUDENTS
WITH COLLEGE PREPAREDNESS

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family. My husband (Tim), I offer special feelings of gratitude and love for being there for me and encouraging me to persevere. My children (Travis, Tyler and Alexis) you are my inspiration, by completing this work you have an example of how hard work and determination are factors that affect your future and not life's circumstances. My mother (Pearl) you instilled in me to put my faith in the Lord and do my best in all endeavors. My mother-in-law (Mary) always provided tender words of encouragement and she is remembered for her "precious" spirit. Without the love, patience, and support of family this work would not have been possible therefore, I dedicate this to my loved ones.

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ABSTRACT

Access to quality precollege counseling is a crucial component of students' post-secondary educational planning. High school counselors provide educational planning and guidance to students which make them a valuable commodity to obtain information for students contemplating their postsecondary options (Hoyt, 2001). School counselors are situated as the focal point for students and their parents to obtain the information needed for academic and financial college preparedness. The research problem was ascertaining a descriptive definition of the elements that comprise the roles of the school counselor in student post-secondary preparedness. As well as determining if there are factors that enhance or inhibit the counselor from effectively performing the roles. A qualitative study using in-depth phenomenological interviews was chosen to obtain a descriptive definition of the school counselor's role in assisting students with college preparedness. This study obtained the perceptions of five school counselors with five or more years of experience in providing precollege counseling to students in high school. The results revealed six themes for successfully assisting students with the launch from high school to post-secondary pursuits.

Key words: high school counselor, counselor's role, precollege counseling, financial preparedness, college preparation, admission requirements, and financial aid resources

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

School counselors play an important role in preparing students for post-secondary education and are often the primary, if not the only, resource students have to access the information and materials they need if they desire to pursue post-secondary education (McDonough & Caledron, 2006; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011). High school counselors provide educational planning and guidance to students which make them a valuable asset for providing information to students contemplating their postsecondary options (Hoyt, 2001). Counselors are typically involved in a variety of activities to assist these students from writing letters, to providing transcripts to distributing standardized test information. However, obtaining a concrete definition regarding the school counselor's specific role in a student's preparedness for post-secondary educational pursuits is a daunting task. The counselor's roles are multifaceted and vary across guidance programs.

In addition to the above mentioned activities, the counselor roles range from career counseling, therapeutic counseling, academic planning, and financial aid knowledge (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2010). The list of tasks counselors perform for students on their way to colleges and universities is long and involved. Based on the pivotal role the counselors play in a student's successful launch from high school to college, it is essential that counselor educators understand the specifics of the role to

provide the training for aspiring counselors. In Counselor Education Programs, counseling students' field experiences could be designed to ensure students learn the specific tasks before they take on professional school counseling positions. Counselor competencies in the area of precollege counseling are essential for effectively assisting students with college readiness (e.g. successful completion of a rigorous high school core, understanding of college and career options, as well as college admissions and financing processes) (Smink, et al., 2010; College Board, 2010). In fact, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) school counseling competencies state under IIIA-5 that "School counselors should articulate and demonstrate an understanding of the principles of career planning and college admissions, including financial aid and athletic eligibility" (School Counselor Competencies, 2012). However, because the duties are not specified, the pre-service experiences of graduates from counselor education programs are uneven and may leave some unprepared for their position in secondary guidance.

By obtaining the school counselor's perspective of their involvement in student college preparedness, this study sought to discover the specific functional roles of the high school counselor in assisting students with post-secondary educational pursuits.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

The profession of school counseling has evolved and changed over the years. Some of the changes have had positive, as well as adverse effects on the school counselor's role in services and type of services provided to students. Some of the hindrances are the inclusion of inappropriate duties such as administrative support and disciplinarians (American School Counselor Association, 2012). Including strategies for conducting college counseling, appropriate information dissemination, understanding

student academic aspirations and student development for college selection were positive additions to the school counselors function (McDonough, 2005). Additional influences affecting the school counselor noted by scholarly research included the notions of gatekeeping and signaling, which prompted public debate regarding the effectiveness and equity of precollege counseling. In relation to this study, these changes have impacted the information dissemination, knowledge and time allotted for college preparedness of students (McDonough & Caledron, 2006; McDonough, 2005).

An early definition of the school counselor role was to provide professional advice regarding the most appropriate curriculum track and course of study to match a student's educational and professional aspirations based on their interests and abilities (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987). School counselors were seen as vocational counselors who directed the student's pathway from school to the world of work or college (Hartung, 2010). School counselors have emerged as educational leaders and are considered vital members of the school's education team. Modern day school counselors help all students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development and career development, thus ensuring that the youth of today become productive and well-adjusted young adults (American School Counselor Association, 2012).

Research has been conducted noting the high level of influence counselors have on the choices students made and their level of preparedness for college (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). Rosenbaum, Miller, and Krei (1996) in their meta-analysis provided information on previous research evaluating the school counselor roles. They noted research in the 1960s suggested counselors used channeling and personal judgment to guide student college choices. In 1976 research observed that although counselors

were moving more toward assisting students with graduation, evaluation of test scores, and personal counseling, they spent less time with college preparedness issues on an individual basis unless a student belonged to a certain academic track (i.e. college preparatory track or a magnet program). However, literature in the 1990s suggested economic constraints forced schools to decrease school counseling budgets; thus, increasing school counselor caseloads and requiring more from counselors with less therefore affecting the services provide to students (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996).

According to the College Board in 2011 school counselor survey:

Counselors' preference for reduced caseloads corroborates research: lower student-to-counselor ratios may be correlated to student success and fewer instances of disciplinary problems. In our survey, public school counselors reported an average caseload of 389 students, and private school counselors reported an average caseload of 211. Counselors in higher performing schools have smaller caseloads. High schools with high college acceptance rates have lower counselor caseloads (335) than do schools with lower college acceptance rates (390). Counselor caseloads rise to 427 students in schools where students are facing the greatest economic challenges (p.21) (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2011).

While the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) and American Counseling Association (ACA) recommend 250-to-1 students to counselor ratio the national average is actually 459-to-1 according to the U.S. Department of Education (U. S. Department of Education, 2010). The report also indicates that South Carolina's

students to counselor ratio as 390 to 1. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) survey results noted that on “average, public school counselors spent 23 percent of their time on postsecondary counseling in 2010, while their private school counterparts spent 55 percent of their time on college counseling” (p. 6) (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011). Counselor caseload and the desire to be helpers affect their ability to assist students with academic and financial preparedness for college enrollment (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2010; McDonough, 2004). Nevertheless the growing number of high school students pursuing a college degree continues to grow with or without appropriate academic and financial preparedness for college (Greene & Forster, 2003).

The acquisition of post-secondary education is vital to the earning power of Americans. Acquiring post-secondary degrees permit individual movement within and out of the various social classes structured in our society. According to the National Center for Education Statistics:

In 2010, the median of earnings for young adults with a bachelor's degree was \$45,000, while the median was \$21,000 for those without a high school diploma or its equivalent, \$29,900 for those with a high school diploma or its equivalent, and \$37,000 for those with an associate's degree. In other words, young adults with a bachelor's degree earned more than twice as much as those without a high school diploma or its equivalent in 2010 (i.e., 114 percent more), 50 percent more than young adult High school completers, and 22 percent more than young adults with an associate's degree. In 2010, the median of earnings for young adults

with a master's degree or higher was \$54,700, some 21 percent more than the median for young adults with a bachelor's degree” (National Center for Education Statistics , 2011).

Students prepared for post-secondary education tend to successfully transition from high school to college and graduate from college; thus strengthening their earning power (Brock, 2010; Greene & Forster, 2003). Although this concept is widely known, many Americans do not participate in higher education partially due to the costs associated with the venture. This statement is confirmed in a recent public opinion poll which indicated students and parents noted attending college as a primary pathway to a middle-class way of life but may not be able to attend. However, given the increasing price of post-secondary education, these families are apprehensive about the ability to afford the pursuit of higher education (Immerwahr, Johson, Gasbarra, Ott, & Rochkind, 2009). This study reflects, yet another paradox within our society in order to have a higher earning power, one must obtain the financial resources to get there. Owens, Lacey, Rawls, and Quince-Holbert (2010) noted there are limitless advantages and assets that come with acquisition of a post-secondary degree, which range from social to economic power that is not as attainable to non-college graduates. This further implicates that defining the role the counselor plays in assisting with college preparedness floods into college retention and graduation which has a benefit to society at large. While counselors have a pivotal role in assisting students in their educational pursuits of higher education, the literature fails to define exactly what that role entails.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There is an abundance of information regarding making college choices, preparation for college admission, and the cost of post-secondary education. The research literature also includes information on reforming school guidance programs, college retention, available financial resources and the transition from high school to college. While the research literature and information suggests the school counselor is important to student college readiness, there is a paucity of information on the specific role the school counselor's play and how they effectively perform the function.

School counselors are situated as the focal point for students and their parents to obtain the information needed for academic and financial college preparedness. School counselors have access to academic records, scholarship standards and can begin to inform students about the processes as early as middle school to ensure that they achieve what they aspire (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987). For example, in the State of South Carolina (SC) a resident of the state graduating from an in-state high school with a 3.0 grade point average (gpa) on the uniformed state grading scale is potentially eligible to receive \$5000 for the S.C. Legislative Incentive for Future Excellence Scholarship (LIFE) (South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, 2010). Students who desire to attend college should be informed of this information upon entering high school, if not in middle school, so they can aim for the appropriate high school grade point average (gpa). Based on the important roles as counselor in college preparation, especially financial preparation, additional training and research needs to be conducted to ensure the students are best served as they prepare for this next phase in life.

Because there is little or no information on the actual roles counselors play in college preparedness there is little that can be done to improve counselor preparedness or pre-service counselor preparation. The research problem is to ascertain a descriptive definition of the elements that comprise the roles as the school counselor in student post-secondary preparedness, as well as to determine if there are factors that enhance or inhibit the counselor from effectively performing these roles. Some researchers suggest that factors such as inappropriate time intervals, counselor student ratios, non-counseling related functions and financial aid resource competencies prevent counselors from being able to provide students information in regards to academic requirements for college admission and financial aspects regarding college costs. (McDonough, 2004, Kirst, 2004; Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010) Research indicates that when school counseling programs provide consistent opportunities for school counselors to provide direct services to students and parents, they serve as a highly effective group of professionals that positively impact student college aspirations, high school achievements and financial aid resource knowledge (McDonough, 2004 & 2005; Plank and Jordan, 2001). School counselors assuming this highly effective role will lead to more students being prepared for post-secondary education (McDonough, 2005).

NATURE OF THE STUDY

The research was a qualitative study which sought to examine the roles of the school counselor in assisting student preparedness for college. The prevailing research question is: What are the roles of the school counselor in providing students with precollege counseling and assistance?

Data were gathered through interviews with high school counselors. Data included, but was not limited to, Federal educational statistics, South Carolina educational statistics, written responsibilities of school counselors, job descriptions of school counselor, public records regarding school demographics, and counselor student ratio information. The American School Counselor Association National Model was reviewed for specific reference to the topic of academic and financial preparedness for college, along with peer reviewed journals and publications.

Participants

Communication of inquiry was sent to high school counselors requesting participation in the study. Based on the number of responses, five counselors were identified as research participants; according to Glesne (2011) this is an acceptable number for qualitative research.

The selection of participants in South Carolina is significant because South Carolina is one of a handful of states that has legislative mandates regarding the roles as the school counselor in student college preparedness. The following sections of South Carolina Code of Law Title 59 relate to this study:

SECTION 59-59-40. Guidance and counseling model - Department of Education's guidance and counseling model must provide standards and strategies for school districts to use and follow in developing and implementing a comprehensive guidance and counseling program in their districts. This model must assist school districts and communities with the planning, development, implementation, and assessment of school guidance and counseling program to support the personal, social,

educational, and career development of pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade students.

SECTION 59-59-70. Implementation of career development plan for educational professionals in career guidance.

SECTION 59-59-110. Implementation of career guidance program model in high school; counseling of students; declaration of area of academic focus within cluster of study.

SECTION 59-59-140. Individual graduation plans; requirements. An individual graduation plan is a student specific educational plan detailing the courses necessary for the student to prepare for graduation and to successfully transition into the workforce or postsecondary education.

SECTION 59-59-120. Limitation of activities of guidance counselors and career specialists. School guidance counselors and career specialists shall limit their activities to guidance and counseling and may not perform administrative tasks.

(South Carolina Legislature, 2005)

Also, South Carolina provides state funded scholarships and grants to assist students with post-secondary educational pursuits.

Relationship to the Study

The research topic was chosen because of the researcher's relationships of working with families in secondary school settings, participation in educating school counselors, training financial aid professionals, and professional responsibilities to help families obtain financial resources for post-secondary education.

Subjectivity and Positionality Concern

As a member of both professions (financial aid and school counseling) and having an understanding of the factors that may contribute to post-secondary preparedness, I had to monitor the usage of financial resource jargons, acronyms and higher education talk. The usage of such verbiage may have had a negative impact on interviews and enhanced perceived power differential.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Research by McDonough (2004) indicates that while school counselors are the logical choice to provide access preparation and assistance to students desiring post-secondary education, they are often not trained in the areas to assist with financial preparedness and may be structurally constrained from being able to fulfill this role in public high schools. This sentiment was echoed by Michael Kirst (2004) in his research that noted counselors are sometimes left as information disseminators instead of agents of one-on-one information to assist students with college information. This lack of individual attention can be attributed to excess workloads that only permit devotion to scheduling and ensuring students complete the graduation requirements (McDonough & Caledron, 2006).

The South Carolina's Personal Pathways to Success Initiative, authorized under the state's Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) in 2005, is a state-mandated school reform model designed to improve student achievement and preparedness for post-secondary education. The mandate was created in an effort to improve educational assessment of students within the state (South Carolina Legislature, 2005). One aspect of the mandate is to ensure educational standards are set high enough so that all students

who desire post-secondary education are prepared. A conceptual facet of the mandate which directly relates to this study is the acknowledgement and requirement for increased counselor roles in education and career planning. According to the mandate school counselors are seen as “key players” in the implementation of the EEDA (Smink, et al., 2010). The mandate also incorporates the consideration of post-secondary aspirations and preparations across grades levels K-12 (Personal Pathways to Success, 2011). A longitudinal study is underway regarding the effectiveness of the mandate but the elements directly related to this study are not available. Since South Carolina is one of a small number of States to have such a legislative mandate, there is no current empirical data regarding how it affects or directs the roles as the counselor. However, the mandate specifically places assisting students with college preparation within the school counseling/guidance department and requires that schools provide professional development and training for counselors in the form of precollege counseling (Smink, et al., 2010). While the assumption that such as mandate should yield ample information from school counselors regarding their roles in assisting students with college preparedness, it could also serve as a limitation if there are scripted responses based on the requirement that certain actions or initiatives should be occurring based on the mandate.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

In determining the framework of this study, a range of possibilities were considered. The study could have been framed on the concept of career counseling, human development, student development, school counselor develop, or competency acquisition during school counselor supervision. Based on the intent of the study and

research method the conceptual framework of this study will center on the self-efficacy of the school counselor in relation to their roles as assisting students with college preparedness. According to Albert Bandura (1986), self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of actions required to manage prospective situations." In other words, self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Bandura described these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave, and feel (Bandura, 1986). School counselors have to be adaptable in completing their tasks and fulfilling their roles. Considering this research phenomena from a theoretical approach of self-efficacy combined with the narrative inquiry will provide an opportunity to obtain the full rich stories regarding the counselors' experiences. School counselors have a desire to successfully complete their responsibilities and a genuine desire to help the student. Self-efficacy indicates all individuals can identify goals they wish to accomplish, and things they might like to change. School counselors' daily activities are potentially ever changing; however their level of self-efficacy predicts how they handle the challenges. Although there are scales to measure school counselor self-efficacy obtaining their narratives may reveal their level of self-efficacy to further obtain their roles in assisting students with college preparedness. A definition of self-efficacy in school counseling is the school counselor's "perceived ability to carry out school counseling related tasks" (Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, & Johnston, 2009). The tasks are their roles in relation to this study.

A review of research literature noted a couple of studies in which various scales were used to assess school counselor self-efficacy. The School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSES) was the latest scale created to assess school counselor self-efficacy. In

2005, Bodenhorn and Skaggs developed a School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSES) to assess the self-efficacy of the school counselor. The SCSES is an instrument with 43 items designed specifically for school counselors based on their unique function and position in schools (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, Development of the School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale, 2005). The intent of the creation of the scale was to be used across various school counseling settings based on the unique differences of the school counseling programs (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, Development of the School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale, 2005).

The SCSES was used in a quantitative study to determine if the level of school counselor self-efficacy affected their choice of school counselor programs to assist with addressing the achievement gap of students. The school counselors with high levels of self-efficacy can have a greater impact on students than those with lower self-efficacy in relation to improving school achievement gaps. The study conducted by Bodenhorn, Wolfe, and Airen (2010) posed three research questions, however two are closely related to this study: (a) Are there relationships between school counselor self-efficacy and the school counseling program approach used? and (b) Is there a relationship between school counselor self-efficacy and the school counselor's perception of achievement gap status and equity in school? The results of the study confirmed that "school counselors with higher levels of self-efficacy seem to be having a different impact on their students than those with lower levels of self-efficacy. However, these were small results which suggest there are other variables that need to be identified in this area. (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010). They did find a large effect size that suggested "the fact that school counselor self-efficacy accounts for a relatively large amount of the variation for the

equity variable is promising in terms of the impact that school counselors are having on the broader school community (p. 171)(Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010)”.

A quantitative study conducted by Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, and Johnson (2009) examined school counselor disposition, which included counselor self-efficacy as a predictor for data usage in counseling programs. They contend that with the various accountability measures enforced upon schools, school counselor programs must also be data driven. The authors noted the availability of the SCSES but opted to create a school counselor self-efficacy scale of their study to include the other variables defined in the disposition. The findings of the study suggest that there were two dispositions related to data usage and one was school counselor self-efficacy. The researchers noted, “That school counselors’ data usage is influenced by their beliefs about their general ability to cope with a variety of difficult demands and in relation to tasks that are specific to their profession. (p. 349). Further their results “illustrate that school counselors’ self-efficacy beliefs have more influence on data usage than either openness to change or commitment to counseling development (p. 350) (Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, & Johnston, 2009).

The two studies above indicate that counselors with high self-efficacy or confidence in their abilities are more likely to perform the roles of their position more effectively. Each study noted the need for additional research regarding school counselor self-efficacy and their roles in the schools. The use of data to validate and enhance school counselor programs and activities toward providing students with college preparedness is essential and relates to this study. Likewise, having an understanding of the achievement gap and academic equity affect the ability of students to be ready for post-secondary educational pursuits is equally important. The self-efficacy of the school

counselor is key in understanding their role within the school counselor program of providing precollege counseling to students.

ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The nature of qualitative research does not involve experimental manipulation according to Heppner, Kivlighan, and Wampold (1992). Heppner and Heppner (2004) noted phenomenology study describes the meaning of experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals. In this type of qualitative method the researcher reduces the experiences to a central meaning or the essence of the experience (p. 168)". According to Maxwell (2005), qualitative researchers "rarely have the benefit of previously planned comparisons, sampling strategies, or statistical manipulation that 'control for' plausible threats and must try to rule out validity threats after the research has begun (p. 107)". However, the components of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability will be taken into consideration to ensure the quality and rigor of the study to eliminate potential threats before and during the research.

A limitation of the study was the inability to obtain information from a variety of geographic locations. It was assumed that while the inquiry was statewide, it was possible respondents would be in the Midlands Areas of the state. While this geographic area provided the opportunity to obtain school counselor experiences from a wide variety of socio-economic school based communities and multiple districts there was the potential for exclusion of representation from rural and inner city areas.

The South Carolina legislative mandate may serve as a benefit or limitation to the study. The benefit will be the richness of the experiences of the school counselors that are providing precollege counseling in their high school. The limitation may be

misrepresentation of experiences because of the mandate and the apparent need to appear as compliant.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study sought to provide a descriptive view of the school counselor's role in student preparedness to pursue post-secondary education. The qualitative research was designed to acquire data that had not been collected regarding the phenomenon. It was hopeful that the study would generate knowledge for assisting students with college preparation and be applicable to the profession of school counseling. The specific areas of consideration for the significance of the study were knowledge generation, professional application and social change.

Knowledge Generation

The scientific purpose of research is to provide an "objective, effective and credible way of knowing" (p. 8) according to Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, Research Design in Counseling (1992). They also contend that the philosophical purpose of research in counseling is to expand knowledge in field work in relation to client expectations of the counselor and counseling process. McDonough (2004) noted "the barrier to college access are primarily financial and academic" (p. 13) she contends that more and better trained counselors in the areas of college preparation and available financial resources could assist with deconstruction of the barriers and improve equality for post-secondary educational pursuit. It is anticipated that obtaining a narration of the school counselor's experiences will assist with the definition of the role and their perceived competencies about college readiness components. As well as provide a forum

for them to express their individual beliefs regarding their ability to successfully perform precollege counseling and assist students with college preparedness.

Professional Application

The findings have transferability to assist school counselors in competences needed to enhance or embrace the role needed to assist students with academic and financial preparedness to ensure all students are provided appropriate information for access to college. Counselor educators can utilize the information to incorporate a lesson or guest speaker during the practicum or internship process to provide aspiring school counselors this information to facilitate awareness and set foundation for building competencies on available financial aid resources for college and admission requirements.

Social Change

Obtaining a descriptive understanding of what school counselors believe is their role in providing students with tools and information needed for a college education has the potential to improve their assistance with college enrollment and retention. If there is a gap in their understanding of their jobs and the needs of their students then there is a need for a change in the counselor's role to improve services to students. According to McDonough (2004), improving counseling in schools, with school counselors' role incorporating active involvement with students and families for college preparation, would have a significant bearing on college access for low income, rural and urban students as well as students of various racial/ethnic origins (McDonough P. M., 2004).

DEFINITION OF OPERATIONAL TERMS

The following terms require explanation for understanding their context within the study:

1. Counselor Role: Information, dissemination of data and activities to provide tangible information regarding available financial aid resources and scholarships, college admission requirements and individual counseling.
2. College Knowledge: The information and skills required to permit students to effectively navigate the application for college admission and the financial aid processes while having an understanding of the culture and norms of college. (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009)
3. College Readiness – College readiness is the combination of skills, knowledge and habits to fully participate in college courses. Components of college readiness include: a.) Academic knowledge and skills evidenced by successful completion of a rigorous high school core curriculum; b.) Success in college-prep and college-level courses taken in high school that require in-depth subject-area knowledge, higher-order thinking skills, strong study and research skills; c.) Advanced academic skills, such as reasoning, problem solving, analysis, and writing abilities, e.g., as demonstrated by successful performance on the SAT or ACT; d.) College planning skills, as demonstrated by an understanding of college and career options, college admissions and financing process. (College Board, 2010)
4. Financial Aid Resources: Federal and/or State funds to assist with cost of education (grants, loans and work-study)
5. Higher education: the study beyond secondary school at an institution that offers program terminating in an associate, baccalaureate or higher degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

6. Precollege Counseling: Activities performed by School Counselors that help students pursue post-secondary education with a.) curriculum decisions b.) college attendance requirements and c.) navigation of the financial aid application process. (National Association for College Admission Counseling 1990)
7. Post-Secondary Aspirations: The combination of a student's ambition ("the ability to look ahead and invest in the future" p.173) and inspiration ("the ability to invest the required time, energy and effort" p. 173) regarding their educational and vocational dreams about their future. (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011)
8. Postsecondary education: provisions of formal instructional programs with a curriculum designed primarily for students who have completed the requirements for a high school diploma or equivalent (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).
9. Preparedness: The quality or state of being ready before hand including having the knowledge about post-secondary education.
10. Scholarships: Institutional/non-Institutional funds to assist with cost of education that are based on academic performance.
11. Un-readiness: Not prepared mentally, physically, academically, or financially for the post-secondary education.

SUMMARY

The study helps understand the functional roles of the school counselor regarding assisting students and their families with post-secondary preparedness. The description of the role came from practicing school counselors and their daily experiences in relation to the phenomena. The results provide a better understanding of how counselors perceive their roles regarding the needs of their students by providing college preparation

counseling to students in our secondary schools. The following chapters will detail the review of literature and research methodology.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the relevant literature related to the roles of the school counselor in providing precollege counseling. The literature review includes the functional roles as the school counselor in assisting the students with academic curriculum guidance, college admission requirements, financial aid knowledge and overall preparedness for the transition from high school to college. The review denotes how, if at all, the changing roles as the school counselor has impacted the information and time allotted for precollege counseling of students desiring to pursue post-secondary education.

STRATEGY USED FOR SEARCHING LITERATURE

Search for literature on the following topics were conducted utilizing individual key words or key words in conjunction with term connectors: Roles as school counselor, high school counselor, precollege counseling, college affordability, financial aid resources, college preparation, college preparedness, financial preparedness, cost of school/college, socio economic status of students, access to college, leveraging, financial literacy, privilege, school counselor responsibilities, and college knowledge. The Gamecock Power Search engine located on the Thomas Cooper Library website of the University of South Carolina was utilized to identify full text, peer reviewed articles from 2000 through 2011. Gamecock Power Search searches multiple databases at one time;

the limitation to this search engine is that there are limited history databases. However, this limitation does not affect the search for articles in this study. Journals comprised the main resources for which empirical research information was investigated. Since this search yielded little empirical data additional search engines utilized for scholarly articles on the topic included: Academic Search Premier, ERIC (EBSCO), and Psyc INFO all accessible through the USC library online services. TDNet was also used to search for electronic articles in journals, magazines and newspapers. Google internet search was conducted for literature not accessible via the University Library resources. Two textbooks and data from various National surveys/studies conducted by the US Department of Education and national professional associations will be referenced.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The search for relevant literature quickly depicted that there were limited articles based on empirical research that encompassed the complete context of the study. A review of the literature prompted a search that extended prior to 2000. This extended search yielded additional literature on the roles as the school counselor due to transitions in concept of counseling programs and research conducted regarding “signaling and channeling” by counselors. However the literature still illustrated an exhaustive amount of negative or missing aspects of the school counselor’s role in providing college readiness for postsecondary educational pursuit. There was a paucity of literature that referenced or provided examples of school counselors being a positive factor for assisting families with precollege counseling. This gap in the literature suggests further research is needed noting the role assumed by counselors that are assisting families with college preparedness.

In order to examine the research phenomena the literature review was chronologically constructed within the following thematic schemes. The review begins with a historical glimpse surrounding the functional roles of a school counselor. Then move to the roles as the school counselor in college preparation followed with consideration of the workload of school counselors based on information from national survey results. The literature review culminates with a summary noting the totality significance of literature in the desired study.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ROLES AS SCHOOL COUNSELOR

This section includes a review of the literature that indicates the roles as the school counselor historically, significant changes and current state. The literature comprises empirical research as well as contextual information regarding the roles as the school counselor. The type of literature is distinguished within each summary.

A quantitative study was conducted in 1989 by a team of researchers regarding the roles as the school counselor from the school counselors' perspective. The purpose of the study was to investigate how school counselors in differing structured secondary schools viewed their functions (Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989). The study was conducted based on the changing roles as the school counselor based on the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) implementation of directives and goals regarding the functions of a school counselor. They required that the goal of guidance counseling was to foster psychological growth of students and the school counselors' role was to serve as a facilitator of this development. School Counselors were required to obtain competencies in the areas of group counseling, consultation, development/career guidance, and developmental assessment and program evaluation as a means of making a

significant contribution to the development of students. Therefore creating a functional shift from remedial/crisis approaches to student development. The survey consisted of 58 items in six categories of school counseling services. The respondents were asked how often they performed a function and how important was the function to them. The results of the study revealed a function disconnect between the goals of guidance created by ASCA and the perceived roles of the counselors. While counselors were implementing some of the goals they were still focused on vocational and career guidance for the students. The disengagement of the ASCA roles appeared to be related to lack of competencies in developmental psychology, adjusting to the change with school administrators, and increased awareness of counselors regarding the theoretical orientation of the profession. (Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989). Even though the research of Tennyson, et al. was quantitative the questions asked and the responses are applicable to this study.

In 1996 Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei (1996) conducted a qualitative study using face-to face interviews with high school counselors to obtain counselors' perspectives on their influence in "guiding students' college plans and the strategies they employ in advising students in making choices (p. 259)." These researchers contended that the counselor's job responsibilities shifted from vocational counseling in the 1960s to college preparation counseling in the 1970s to personal (therapeutic) counseling in the 1990s. Their review of prior research provided insight into the accepted practice of counselors during the 1960s in using established and individual measures to predetermine the postsecondary educational paths of students. Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei (1996) also cited work from the 1976 which indicated the more subtle approaches in regards to the

counselors in the study to inflict their personal judgment regarding student's ability to attend college. In the 1976 research counselors simply withheld information from students they did not deem ready for four year institutions and geared them toward two year institutions. However, the qualitative study conducted in 1996 by Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei (1996) yielded results that indicated in counselors efforts not to inflict their personal views on students coupled with their unwillingness to provide bad information to students they created a system of services in which students were not being provided "the information and advice they needed to prepare for their futures (p. 257)". This system included two strategies used in school counseling: encouraging college for all and stressing personal counseling. The participant interviews were conducted in a setting that provided a comfort level for counselors to speak freely. The results of Rosenbaum and associates (1996) study found that counselors had less authority regarding the influence of student choice about college; however counselors may not have been "giving students the information they need about the requirements for completing college, then many students may be aimlessly drifting through high school and community college without any notion of what will ultimately be expected of them (p. 278)." Although the research of Rosenbaum and associates (1996) was focused on gate-keeping for school counselors, the findings are very applicable to this study.

Bemak & Chung (2008) published an article which evaluated the role of school counselors in relation to the nice counselor syndrome (NCS) based on a compilation of research from others. The nice counselor syndrome is defined as counselors being more of a problem-solver as opposed to stressing socially just policies that may cause conflicts with others. As well as it "presents as a way of understanding the resistance those

counselors demonstrate in failing to make the kinds of professional changes recommended by multicultural/social justice school counseling advocates”. (Bemak & Chung, 2008) They explained that NCS serves as a barrier for school counselors providing students the necessary information to close the disparity gap that exists in academic achievement. The article explored factors that contributed to the school counselors refusal to “exercise new professional roles as multicultural/social justice, leaders, advocates and change agents in educational settings” which leads to improvement in students’ educational achievement (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

In the article Bemak and Chung (2008) provide examples of how the manifestation of the NCS can affect the work of the school counselor. They asked readers to consider five questions as they read the article, three of relevance to this study are listed as follows: a.) Why did I become a school counselor? b.) What do I hope to achieve in doing this sort of work? c.) What am I doing to address those systemic factors that contribute to the perpetuation of the academic achievement gap in particular? They noted that how one responds to these questions is an indicator if they are susceptible to NCS. According to Bemak and Chung “school counselors who do not fall prey to NCS think differently about their job, professional roles and personal responsibilities within the schools they work. The article concluded with sixteen recommendations to assist counselors in not falling prey to the NCS but moving beyond the syndrome as effective change agents. (Bemak & Chung, 2008) The review of this information has relevance for this study in that it evaluated various roles of the school counselor which can be correlated to the preparatory role for college.

ROLES OF SCHOOL COUNSELOR IN COLLEGE PREPARATION

Tierney and Venegas (2009) suggest that “there are students who miss out on higher levels of financial aid because they are not adequately academically prepared, but there are also those who are eligible and who qualify for aid but do not apply for it. At a time when most scholars advise that postsecondary education is necessary for gainful employment, why are academically qualified low-income students not drawing on available funds for a college education?” (Tierney & Venegas, 2009) To help answer this question and inform the discussion, Tierney & Venegas in 2009 conducted an analysis on a compilation of literature reviews from a cultural ecological framework to examine how students thought about going to and paying for college. They concluded the review with the following statement: “If students receive better information in a timeframe that allows them to prepare academically and have the requisite support to act on that information, then access to a postsecondary education is likely to rise for low-income youth” (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Their literature review included information on the implication of the Georgia Hope Scholarship on students’ ability to afford college as well as California, Kansas and Nevada state funding for college. This is significant to this study because references to the use of S.C. Educational Lottery Resources will be examined in obtaining the school counselor’s competency about such programs. The researchers also support continued use of qualitative measure to obtain an understanding of how students perceive and act upon information obtained from school counselors about available resources for college.

McDonough and Calderon (2006) indicated based on existing research the average school counselor is potentially unavailable for college preparatory tasks and

regularly uniformed regarding costs and financial aid. Unfortunately, the least available and uninformed school counselors are employed in America's schools with high underrepresented minority and low socioeconomic status individuals (McDonough 2006). Therefore, McDonough and Calderon (2006) engaged 63 college counselors in urban secondary schools with high low income and underrepresented minority groups to obtain an understanding of the phenomena. The purpose to the 2006 qualitative study was to evaluate the perceptual differences between counselors and their students regarding college costs and financial aid. The researchers of the 2006 study contend that within schools, the school counselor is of utmost importance in improving college enrollment. Counselors have impact on various components of college preparation, such as structuring information and activities around student college aspirations and assisting students with academic preparation for college (McDonough & Caledron, 2006). The researchers chose the following questions for the interviews: What do counselors know about the cost of colleges, financial aid system and how do they estimate college affordability? And how is the financial aid information disseminated by counselors shaped and informed by their assumptions of the student population they work with. According to McDonough and Calderon these questions were posed "given the sizeable gap in the literature on counselor financial aid knowledge and information sharing" (p. 1706). Each participant was asked to participate in individual interviews and a focus group. In the focus group counselors were asked to provide their "perceptions of their student's college choice approaches." They identified four conceptual themes via a grounded theoretical analysis of the participant transcripts: information distribution strategies, meaning and impact of affordability, relative meaning of money, and

perceptions of parent loan concerns. The researchers suggested that timely, informed and reliable advisement regarding college pricing and financial aid availability makes a substantial difference on the pursuit and preparedness for college enrollment. The research is significant for this study because it provide an empirical view of the counselors' perceptions and competencies in relation to the financial aspect of college preparation (McDonough & Caledron, 2006).

Rosenbaum, Stephan, and Rosenbaum (2010) reflected on the school counselor as gatekeeper. The information they provided in 2010 resounds many of the issues presented in 2008 by Bemak and Chung. This article has revelance to the study of the school counselor's role for students pursuing college because it directly addressed how school counselors provided information to students under the concept of college for all students and reviews the caseload of counselors. The article by Rosenbaum and associates (2010) compiles empircal regarding the issues for school counselors attempting to promote college access for all students. The researchers summarized their review as follows:

Although no one will regret a reduction in the old model of gate keeping (especially since far too many students were discouraged from attending college on the basis of their family income, skin color, or gender, not because of their academic achievement), all is not well when it comes to counseling in today's high schools. A serious problem is the lack of counselors-a problem that may be getting much worse as the nation's economic troubles affect school district budgets. Data from 2001 reveal the on average; the ratio of counselors to students is 1 to 284. In some

high schools, the workloads for counselors are truly inconceivable, with the ratio exceeding 1 to 700. Possibly as a result of the workload issues, today's typical counselor tends to present an oversimplified picture of open admissions. Counselors often say that students can enter college even with low achievement in high school, but they rarely warn that low-achieving students cannot enter college-credit classes or certain programs. Avoiding these details keeps students optimistic and encourages their college plans. However, it also gives students insufficient information to make sound decisions (p. 5).

The implications of the article are applicable to understanding the roles of the counselor, their workload and thought processes when providing services, as well as information to students.

NATIONAL SURVEYS DIRECTLY RELATED TO STUDY

In 2002, the National Center for Education Statistics conducted a survey about guidance counseling in public high schools. The survey asked schools how much their guidance programs "emphasized four goals: helping students plan and prepare for their work roles after high school, helping students with personal growth and development, helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary schooling, and helping students with their academic achievement in high school. Among these goals, helping students with their academic achievement was the most emphasized goal at the schools surveyed: 48 percent emphasized this goal foremost. In comparison, 26 percent of schools reported that the primary emphasis of their guidance program is to help students plan and prepare for postsecondary schooling, 17 percent to help them with personal growth and development,

and 8 percent to help them plan and prepare for their work roles after high school”.

(NCES, 2002) These goals and reported findings of this survey will be beneficial in theme identification of this study.

To meet the core mission, which is to “help all students make the transition from high school graduation to college”, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) annually provides a report of the State of College Admission which describes key trends in the transition from high school to college. The NACAC has a statement on “Precollege Guidance and Counseling and the Roles as the School Counselor”. In this statement NACAC defines precollege counseling as “activities that help students: 1) pursue the most challenging curriculum that results in enhanced postsecondary educational options; 2) identify and satisfy attendant requirements for college access; and 3) navigate the maze of financial aid, college choice and other processes related to college application and admission” (p32). (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2011) The reports directly relate to this study because each includes quantitative methodological results of a national survey of school counselors regarding precollege counseling. The purpose of the surveys are to collect information from secondary school counselors and counseling departments about their priorities and work responsibilities, particularly in relation to: helping students with college access and understanding their academic options along with the counselor’s communication efforts with students, parents and colleges.

According to NACAC strong effective precollege counseling begins early in a student’s secondary education and requires the utilization of trained school counselors who are able to “facilitate student development and achievement”. They suggest

counselors can be a “significant asset” in college preparation. (NACAC 2011) The 2011 State of College Admission survey results provided several potential themes for this study in regards the school counselor’s role in student college preparedness. Including the impact of student to counselor ratio, time spent counseling for college, inclusion of college counseling staff, and professional development of counselor. Results of NACAC’s 2010 Counseling Trends Survey, which included private schools, indicated an average high school student-to counselor ratio, including part-time staff, of 272:1 and that public schools had higher student-to-counselor ratios. Also significant was the ranking of departmental goals of the counselors. The top four rankings were noted as: “helping students with their academic achievement in high school; helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary; helping students with personal growth and development; and helping students plan and prepare for their work roles after high school” (p.31) (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2011). The 2010 results also indicated that most school counselors had a variety of job duties which included college counseling and on an average 29 percent of the counselor’s time was spent on post-secondary admission counseling. It is important to note that Orfield and Paul (1994) speculated that the large caseload of counselors and the desire to be helpers also affects their ability to assist families and students with college readiness.

SUMMARY

The literature review confirms school counselors play a significant role in providing college preparation for students. The review provides an empirical evaluation of the practical phenomena that motivates this study which is to obtain descriptive

knowledge regarding the functional roles of the school counselor in providing students with precollege counseling.

Early research provided insight to the roles as the counselor during the evolution from vocational and guidance counseling to incorporation of human development. (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996) The advancement of the profession of school counseling provided the inclusion of professional guidelines and required competencies to assist with providing quality to services to students. (Bemak & Chung, 2008) The review of the literature indicates a gap of available research data regarding the phenomenon. The literature research provided information on some of the components of precollege counseling such as understanding of financial aid resources and family perceptions regarding financial aid. (McDonough & Caledron, 2006) (Tierney & Venegas, 2009) However, there was still no specific information on how a school counselor performs these function or the specifics of the functions. Quantitative data, surveys and reports provide general information however the most closely related qualitative study that ventured into self-respective roles as the school counselor was in 1996. (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996) The national surveys provide sufficient general data regarding the school counselors' functions however lists and broad categorical descriptions do not provide the depth needed to understand the school counselor's role or obtain their perceived self-efficacy regarding their role. This gap in the literature validates the need for this type of study and its potential implications to the profession of school counseling.

The third chapter provides the methodology and theoretical framework that will guide this study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The practical phenomena that motivated this study is the role the school counselor fulfills in assisting students with preparation for post-secondary education. The literature suggests that counselors play an important role in college preparedness and life beyond high school for youth (McDonough, 2004; Orfield & Paul, 1993, Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei, 1996; NACAC 2010). Understanding this perceived role is important in obtaining the services and counseling provided to students in preparation for post-secondary pursuits.

The majority of literature reviewed regarding the school counselor's role in regards to college preparedness of high school students, financial aid knowledge, financial readiness, academic readiness and school counselor competencies in these areas is not research driven. While the literature yields a great deal of information on practices, program reviews, evaluation of services, and interventions of school counselors. Little research has been conducted on the functional roles as the counselor in assisting students with information, tools, and skills needed for post secondary education preparedness. This includes helping them understand cost, resources, or academic requirements to make informed decisions as well as ensure a foundation for post-secondary matriculation. There is little research that investigates the counselor's perception of his or her role in helping students prepare for post-secondary education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The intrinsic lack of research regarding the school counselor's functional role in regards to the college preparedness of students makes it difficult to determine which theoretical framework to base this research. One might think that a Grounded Theoretical approach would be appropriate for this research since grounded theory is developed from the data collected in the field. According to Heppner and Heppner (2004), grounded theorist do not test existing theory or try to fit the collected data into preconceived concepts. Instead, all the theoretical concepts are derived from the data analysis and account for the phenomenological study variations. Due to the dearth of empirical research, a grounded theory approach is not as appropriate at this juncture as conducting a study to obtain a current day descriptive review of the school counselor's role. A grounded theoretical approach may be useful in future research when there may be more data. Furthermore, utilization of quantitative research would provide a general description of the roles of a school counselor however this approach would not provide the depth needed based on the intent of the research and would not answer the prevailing research question. A noted weakness of quantitative research is the design may cause the researcher to miss phenomena because the focus is on theory or hypothesis testing rather than on theory or hypothesis generation. In addition, the knowledge produced by a quantitative study might be too abstract and general for direct application to specific local situations.

According to Heppner and Heppner (2004) the value of qualitative research is to understand and analyze a phenomenon; and through this understanding and observation obtain a rich description that represents the participants lived experiences through writing

and interpretation. Conducting qualitative research is the best approach to obtain a full description of the school counselor's role in assisting students with preparedness for post-secondary education. According to Heppner, Kivlinghan, & Wampold (1992) science can be viewed as a "mode of controlled inquiry to develop an objective, effective and credible way of knowing" (p. 8) (Heppner, Kivlinghan, & Wampold, 1992). These scholars indicate that the purpose of research in counseling is to advance knowledge, make discoveries and to acquire facts about counseling and counseling practices. While understanding that the phenomena of interest includes observable, subjective and individual experiences of the counselor.

The paradigm or methodological framework that seems most appropriate for this research is interpretivism or phenomenological. Textbooks on qualitative research use these two paradigms interchangeably, individually, but not comparatively. According to Glesne (2011) ways of knowing in research include the paradigm of interpretivism; she indicated that other labels for this framework include: Constructivism, Naturalism, Phenomenological and Hermeneutical. The interpretive approach assumes that reality is socially constructed with complex interwoven variables that are difficult to measure. Hunt (2011) indicates "because of its exploratory nature, qualitative research allows professionals to learn about the lived experiences of people and understand phenomena in a natural environment" (p. 296). The purpose of this type of research is to obtain contextualization, understanding and interpretation of the phenomena in question by interaction with participants to obtain the information from their own perspectives. According to Leedy & Ormord (2005) phenomenological study is an attempt to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular situation

or event. Further, the phenomenological study tries to answer the research question through indepth interviews, observations and data collection with/by participants.

Utilizing this theoritcal framework provided the depth needed to understand, conceptulatzize and obtain a descriptive perspective of the school counselor's role in assisting students with readiness for higher education. Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei's (1996) qualitative study found that the self-perception of the high school counselor's view of their influence on students plans to attend college provided an opportunity to obtain additional informtion regarding counselors' roles as 21st century counselors in assisting students with college readiness.

The theoretical framework was phenomenological and the method to obtain the research information was narrative inquiry. Ospina and Dodge (2005) suggest that narrative inquiry if a form of interpretive research that provides a positive contribution to research. They indicate that "stories are compelling" (p. 143) and the mere nature of telling a story provides a rich context of information not attainable via a survey or collection of statistical analysis. For within stories a researcher might obtain narratives that not only assist with the exploration of issues but may receive information regarding actions to improve the story for future use. In their review of narrative inquiry, Kim and Latta (2010) realized that narrative inquiry provided an avenue for researches to conceputualize participants' identity and identify areas for improvement in the educational setting of the research.

According to Merriam (2002) narrative inquiry is a "fundamental interest in exploring the lives of individuals, in making sense of their experiences and in constructing and communicating the meaning of those experiences." Utilizing a narrative

approach provided the school counselors an opportunity to provide their stories regarding their role in assisting students with college preparedness as well as to genuinely understand their functional roles in the process (Merriam, 2002).

ETHICAL PROTECTION CONSIDERATION

The research was conducted in accordance with University of South Carolina IRB standards and the Ethical Standards of the American Counseling Association. The principles of non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, justice, and fidelity were honored. The study followed the counseling principle of ‘do no harm’. Identifiable participant information was not disclosed and all information was confidential. Participants are identified as counselor 1-5; the number was selected randomly for each high school counselor. Each participant was provided an invitation letter which included confidentiality statement. Risk to participants was minimal; however, the benefit to the profession and community are potentially significant. It is hoped that the data collection will provide a benefit to the community at large by providing information that maybe helpful to others in post-secondary pursuits.

CONTEXT OF STUDY

The study was conducted in South Carolina. Schools located in this geographic area vary in size, socio-economic structure, inner city, rural, and suburban constructs with multi-tier performance ratings. School counselor-to-student ratios of the participants’ schools are similar for the high schools in that geographic area. The selection of this location provided an array of similarities and differences among participant experiences that assisted with the transferability of the findings and theme generation. The schools were identified through an internet search and counselors were contacted by e-mail

asking for volunteers for the study. The first five individuals who responded and met the criteria were selected for the study. The number of participants is sufficient to obtain the depth needed for this phenomenological research. According to Creswell (1998) 5 to 25 participants with direct experience related to the phenomenon is a typical sample size. Contact was then made with the volunteers and further information about the study was provided and initial rapport building was established.

RESEARCH QUESTION

According to Heppner and Associates (1992) descriptive design provides an opportunity to study the phenomenon in a sample drawn from the population of interests; making the reliability and validity of the observations to promote transferability in qualitative research. Descriptive questions ask what the phenomena are like. There is no experimental manipulation but data collection on inventories, surveys or interviews. Heppner and Heppner (2004) note that the development of research questions in phenomenological study are for understanding the day-to-day experiences of individuals and explore the meaning of those experiences. The questions generate dialogue between the researcher and the participant. The prevailing research question for the phenomena regarding this study was: What are the roles as the high school counselor in assisting students with preparation for post-secondary education?

According to Hunt (2011) qualitative counseling research depends mainly on the interview with the participant; thus the researcher needs to be explicit with construction of the interview questions and use of questions in the study. The questions used throughout the research for data collection process were developed to provide a descriptive understanding of the school counselor's role in providing preparedness for

post-secondary education and obtain the counselor's individual perspective regarding this role. The validity of qualitative research, according to Heppner and associates (1992) are based on the believability and trustworthiness of the categorical coding that derived from the interviews with the research participants.

To assist with insuring the appropriateness of questions used in the study the following measures were taken: peer review of questions, member checking with school counselor participants, and adaptation of related questions from existing literature including modified questions from a national survey.

PARTICIPANTS

The selection of participants was based on criterion sampling. The purpose of the study was to obtain a descriptive definition of the role of the school counselor in the preparedness of students for post-secondary education. Heppner and Heppner (2004) indicated criterion-based sampling in used in phenomenological study to select participants who meet the phenomenon under study and can articulate their experiences. The criteria to participate in the research were: high school counselors assigned responsibility for students at each grade level between 9th through 12th (example: alpha distribution instead of grade level); counselors working at the high school level for at least five years.

According to Patton (2002) utilization of purposeful sampling in the form of criterion sampling provides a manageable information system that exhibits certain predetermined characteristics to provide depth in the qualitative analysis of the research. The use of these participants made for diversified life and counseling experiences, provided data across social classes and school districts. The richness of the data from this

purposeful sample provided the descriptive information needed to identify the roles as the school counselor with student post-secondary readiness.

An internet search was conducted on 10 school districts with 29 high schools to identify school counseling departments where the student caseload was assigned by alphabet distribution or mixed distribution. The review of each schools' website yielded the following: 18 schools used alphabetical distribution, three schools assigned by grade, three schools used a mixed method (example: 9th grade counselor, 12th grade counselor and the other grades distributed by alphabet), four schools had only one counselor and one school did not provide this information on its website. An email request for participation in the study was sent to 32 high school counselors representing the 18 schools with alphabetical distribution and three schools with mixed method. The 32 high school counselors were randomly selected. Nine responses were received. Eight high school counselors agreed to participate in the study and one declined to participate. However, three counselors did not meet the criteria to participate in the study for the following reasons: two had fewer than five years of experience and one was now a middle school counselor in the same district (therefore the email was correct but not the school). The counselor noted a willingness to participate but indicated district approval was required. One counselor indicated while his/her workload was divided by grade level being a small school with two counselors s/he worked with all students and thus meeting the criteria for participation. Therefore, five high school counselors were interviewed for this phenomenological study which is an acceptable sample size for this type of study according to Creswell (1998) along with Heppner and Heppner (2004).

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected individually in face to face interviews with five high school counselors who provided their narratives and insights. A semi-structured interview format was utilized in the investigation. The semi-structured interview inquired about the participants' specific functions and student interactions in pre-college counseling. This interview format allowed the specific experiences and voices of the high school counselors to emerge, thus giving way to a more complex line of inquiry and study. Also, follow-up probes of interview questions were utilized to explore questions in greater depth. All probes were utilized to clarify interview questions and increase data quality. The following questions were asked to study participants:

Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of post-secondary education?
2. What makes a student prepared for post-secondary education?
3. How do you assist students with post-secondary preparation and at what point in their high school tenure? Why at that particular time?
4. How competent do you feel when providing academic counseling for college preparation?
5. How competent do you feel when providing financial aid counseling for college preparation?
6. What competencies did you gain regarding college preparation in your school counselor education program? When did you gain those competencies?

7. With unlimited time and resources what would you provide students with in terms of college preparation? Are you doing any of these things?

Semi-structured interviews were scheduled based on the counselor's availability.

Research inquiry and data collection occurred at a site convenient for the participants to facilitate comfort and convenience for interviewees. Prior to the interview each participant was given a copy of the invitation letter which included a statement of confidentiality. According to IRB, the research was exempt and a signed consent form was not required. The interview data were audio recorded and later transcribed. Participants were informed that a copy of the interview transcript would be emailed to them for review and comment.

Additional data collected included, but was not limited to, Federal educational statistics and South Carolina educational statistics. Further public records regarding school demographics and counselor student ratios of the high schools of the participants were obtained.

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to obtain a description of the school counselor's role in assisting students with preparation for post- secondary education. Interviewing high school counselors was the most effective method to accurately obtain their perceptions and opinions. Primary data for this study was gleaned from interview recordings, transcriptions, and researcher field notes. In effort to ensure the concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability in the qualitative study several procedures were utilized to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Merriam, 2002 and Glense, 2011). The interviews were audio recorded and the digital interviews were

emailed for transcription. Each interview was transcribed by an independent individual trained in medical transcription. The transcription was completed and returned within 48 hours.

The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analyzing phenomenological research as defined by Moustakas (1994) was used in this study. The modified version allowed for a rich depiction of the lived experiences of the participants in relation to the research phenomena. The six steps utilized for data analysis of this study as described by Creswell (2007)) were as follows:

1. Detailed description of the researcher's personal experience with the phenomenon under study. This is provided in the roles as the researcher.
2. Horizontalization of the data occurred with the development of significant statements from the interviews, researcher field notes and pertinent literature regarding the phenomena.
3. The significant statements were then grouped into larger units for theme identification. The themes will be addressed in chapter four.
4. A textural description of the participants lived experiences regarding providing students with precollege counseling for post-secondary preparedness is provided in chapter four.
5. A structural description of how the counselors perceived roles in assisting student with post-secondary readiness and the researcher's reflection are provided in chapter five.

6. Finally the “essence” of the experiences related to the phenomena are provided in chapters four and five.

TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA

Member Check

Member checking is one of eight procedures prescribed by Creswell (1998) and Merriam (2002) which can contribute to the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Member check involves sharing the transcripts and other notes with the participants to ensure accuracy of their ideas and experiences. Each participant was provided his or her transcript to review for accuracy, comments and recommendations. One participant requested that excessive use of “you know” be removed from the transcripts, however no other recommendations or request for changes were received from the participants.

Triangulation

The purpose of triangulation is to increase the validity and credibility of the study (Glesne 2011). Triangulation can occur in multiple forms, in this study, analyst triangulation was used as a way of seeing the data in different lenses (Merriam, 2002 & Creswell 1998). The data were reviewed by the researcher, a peer, and transcripts analyzed using computer software. Understanding the computer software results are only as good as the data input the interview transcripts were loaded in entirety into the software for analysis (Creswell 1998). The process is explained in more detail later in the chapter. Further, themes were developed through coding, the literature review, and the research field notes. The research field notes served as the research journal in which the researcher documented her feelings, observations, thoughts and experiences throughout the research process.

Peer Review

Peer review is another procedure to ensure qualitative research validity (trustworthiness). According to Merriam (2002) and Glense (2011) peer review is allowing others to review the research and provide input throughout the study. A doctoral student in Counselor Education, who completed required course in qualitative research and successfully defended a dissertation utilizing qualitative design, served as a peer who reviewed the transcripts, assisted with coding and theme identification. The peer review was conducted following thematic analysis process as follows: independently read each transcript once and underlined key phrases. Consistencies existed in the five transcripts, which were noted. Then the transcripts were set aside and reviewed again on another day for a fresh perspective. Themes were identified and placed on a spreadsheet. The meaning of each overarching theme was analyzed and codes were placed underneath. The codes were staggered and categorized within the spreadsheet to indicate the number of times present in the transcripts with each review.

Computer Software Use

Each transcript was imported into NVivo 10 for additional identification of codes and themes. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package created by QSR International. It is designed to aid qualitative researchers working with rich text-based information, where deep layers of analysis is required on small or large volumes of data. NVivo is intended to help users organize and analyze non-numerical or unstructured data. The software allows users to classify, sort and arrange information. Figure 3.1 provides an illustration of the statements located in a text search query with included career.

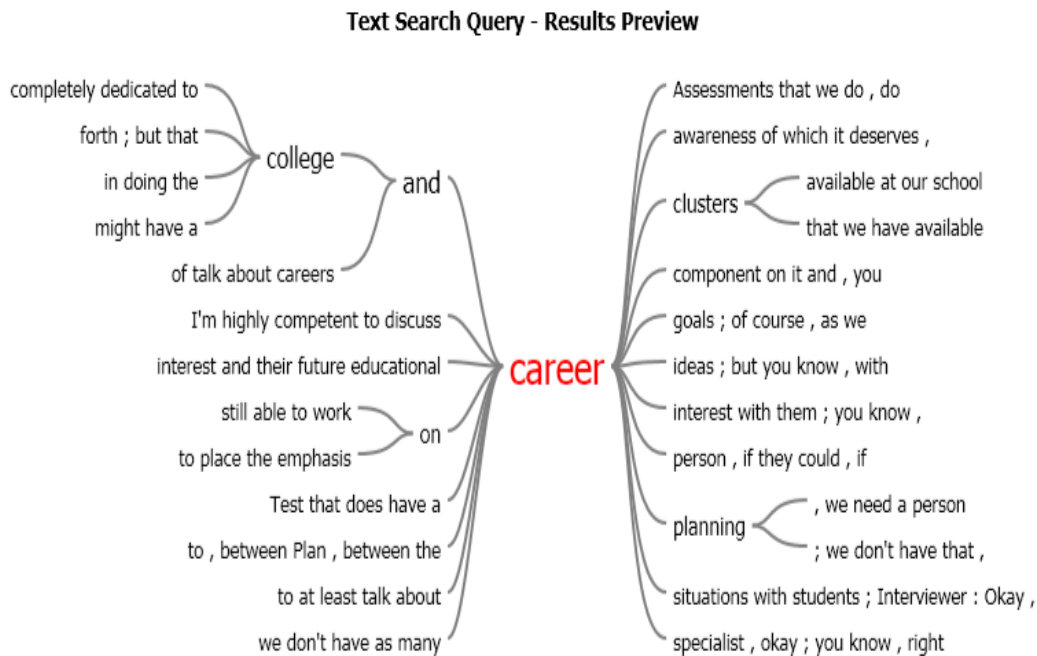


Figure 3.1 NVIVO Illustration

According to Glesne (2011) computers and computer software are tools that help make the qualitative researcher's work "less tedious, more accurate, faster and more thorough (p.206)". According to Creswell (1998) computer software "forces" the researcher to analyze and review the database line by line and think about the meaning of each sentence which can add to the richness of the data.

Rich, Thick Description

In phenomenological research the external validity (generalization) can also be ensured by "allowing the reader to enter the research context (p.49)" which is a third procedure that contributes to trustworthiness according to Creswell (1998). Also Merriam (2002) indicates researchers should attempt to obtain and portray a thick, rich description of the participants lived experiences regarding the phenomena to permit the

reader to be encapsulated in the understanding of the study. Thick, rich descriptions of the counselors' perceived roles in assisting students with college preparedness are including in the findings of the study in chapter four.

ROLES OF RESEARCHER

The research topic was chosen because of the researcher's relationships working with families in secondary school settings, participation in educating school counselors, training financial aid professionals, and professional responsibilities to help families obtain financial resources for post-secondary education.

The researcher believed there might be a perceived power differential between herself and her participants based on the professional relationships as she is an aspiring counselor educator and member of financial aid profession. Most individuals perceive these functions as "experts" in understanding financial resources and general admission requirements for college; therefore individuals may have been reluctant to provide information or may use this as an opportunity to complain about services and not really discuss their experiences.

Subjectivity/Positionality as Strengths

The researcher believed her subjectivity may serve as strength in the research based her on a) awareness of the topic as a producer of information, b) being an end user of services and c) being an individual seeking preparedness information for youth nearing high school graduation. The researcher reviewed and understood the topic from various vantage points as well served as a change agent from a professional standpoint. This knowledge assisted with the identification of themes from the stories of the participants.

Subjectivity/Positionality as Weakness

The largest weakness of subjectivity for me was remaining objective. I am very passionate about my profession and believe counselors have the ultimate desire to be helpful. However, I feared that sufficient information may not be disseminated equally across and within racial and socioeconomic areas. I had to refrain from presupposing outcomes and rely on the participants' stories. However, according to my journal entries, it appears, I maintained objectivity due to the candid openness conveyed by all the participants while describing their experiences and activities.

Monitoring of Subjectivity/Positionality

As the researcher, I monitored subjectivity by ensuring the interview questions were broad enough to illicit the stories of the counselors. While understanding within the stories, information about personal experiences may also include administrative hindrances. I had to monitor my desire to interject regarding the accuracy or misrepresentation of information. Along with monitored the participants' responses and non-verbal cues to ensure positionality was not misrepresented in the form of a power differential.

Finally, as a member of the both professions (counselor education and higher education administration) with an understanding of the factors that may contribute to preparedness for post-secondary education, I monitored and thus refrained from the usage of jargons, acronyms and higher education talk by utilizing effective communication skills. I maintained a research journal to assist with observation of participants' interaction throughout the research. The journal comprised of my field notes and observations which assisted with theme identification.

While the researcher concurs with McDonough (2004) that school counselors are the logical choice to provide access preparation and assistance to students desiring post-secondary education; the narratives of the participants provided perceptions regarding their competencies and functional role in assisting with post-secondary preparedness including any structurally constraints from being able to fulfill this role in public high schools. The research provided information on the current viability in the findings by Michael Kirst (2004) which suggest counselors are sometimes left as information disseminators instead of agents of one-on-one information to assist with preparation.

Summary

The findings in this study will help us understand the phenomena and provide transferable information for potentially assisting others in similar settings. In addition, the information can be used to assist aspiring counselors in the secondary and post-secondary educational environments to meet the needs of students and families in the research population with college preparedness.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to obtain school counselors' perception of their role in assisting students with post-secondary educational preparedness. This study sought to discover the specific functional roles of the high school counselor in assisting students with post-secondary educational pursuits by obtaining the school counselors' perspectives of their involvement in student college preparedness. The research was a phenomenological study and data were gathered through interviews with high school counselors. The prevailing research question was: What are the roles of the school counselor in providing students with precollege counseling and assistance? In this chapter, the results of the participants' semi-structured interviews are presented, along with demographic information of the counselors and statistical information for the schools. Research definitions will be expanded upon to include the participant perspectives. This chapter will also report the identified themes revealed from the interviews as determined from the lived experiences of the participants. Themes were identified as counselor, conductor, coordinator, consultant, counselor confidence and cooperative ideal environment. The final question asked each participant a "miracle question" which provided them an opportunity to express their idea of the perfect circumstances to assist students with college readiness. Finally, the chapter will culminate with a summary of the findings.

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The criteria to participate in the research were: high school counselors with five or more years of experience and assigned responsibility for students at each grade level from 9th through 12th grades. Based on the criteria to participate in the research, five participants were selected for the study. The high school counselors shared rich descriptive information regarding their experiences in assisting students with college preparation in their responses to the following interview questions:

1. What is your definition of post-secondary education?
2. What makes a student prepared for post-secondary education?
3. How do you assist students with post-secondary preparation and at what point in their high school tenure? Why at that particular time?
4. How competent do you feel when providing academic counseling for college preparation?
5. How competent do you feel when providing financial aid counseling for college preparation?
6. What competencies did you gain regarding college preparation in your school counselor education program? When did you gain those competencies?
7. With unlimited time and resources what would you provide students with in terms of college preparation? Are you doing any of these things?

Information regarding their education, family, and other personal information was provided during our introductions and within the interviews. Rapport was easily established with each participant. Demographic information of the research participants

is provided in Table 4.1. Results from the participant survey and school information are provided in Table 4.2.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographic Information

Demographic Information	Participants
Race	
African American	3
White	2
Gender	
Female	2
Male	3
Highest Degree Completed	
Education Specialist	2
Master	1
PhD	2
School Counseling Position	
Director	3
Counselor	2

Participants are identified as counselor 1-5; the number was selected randomly for each high school counselor. Participants were provided the opportunity to recommend a site of their choice for the interviews. The following is researcher observations and information about the participants to provide a visualization of the interview atmosphere and tone of the interviews.

Table 4.2

Participant Survey and School Information

	Participants (Counselors 1-5)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Counselor Survey Information					
Yrs. of Counseling Experience	8	6	13	8	6
Yrs. as High School Counselor	8	6	13	8	6
% Students Attend Post-Secondary	58%	77%	87%	80%	55%
School Statistical Information					
School Enrollment	1553	1144	2072	1144	600
Number of School Counselors	3	3	6	3	2
Potential Counselor Caseload	518	381	345	381	300
Guidance Staff	4	4	13	4	4
Report Card Rating	Average	Average	Excellent	Average	Average
Geographic Setting	Rural	Urban	Suburban	Urban	Rural
% Students w/Subsidized Meals	52%	45%	59%	45%	60%
% Eligible for LIFE Scholarship	35.4%	70.8%	30.3%	70.8%	44.5%

Counselor 1 indicated this is her second high school since obtaining her degree. One of her children is currently a high school counselor as well. She noted her family is devoted to helping students pursue post-secondary education. She and I had difficulty with schedule arrangements. We eventually chose to meet at a public library that was close proximity to her home. She travels to the high school where she works. Unfortunately, the library was extremely busy and there were no conference or study rooms available. So we conducted our interview in a cubicle. I was fearful that the audio recording would have excessive feedback and background noise. However, according to the transcriptionist feedback was minimal. The session began and after a few minutes our surroundings were no longer an issue, it was as though we were the only individuals in the library. There were no distractions or interruptions only the participant and me engaging in communication and her providing her experiences as a school counselor.

Counselor 2 requested that his interview be conducted in his office at the school during school hours. He made the front office staff aware of my appointment. I received a warm welcome from the receptionist and provided instruction on how to navigate through the corridor. The guidance office was centrally located, but it was quite a maze to get there. The halls were empty since the students were in class. The guidance office was spacious there were multiple offices along the perimeter and his office was down a hall. His office was small with a warm feeling. The walls were adorned with college paraphernalia and his credentials. He had ample resource materials on the bookshelf. I thanked him for seeing me and agreeing to participate. He noted, "Anything to help. I was accepted into a doctoral program but family matters prevented me for starting." He

spoke about his family for a few moments and then we began the interview. He noted some of his experience with college applications, the admissions process and financial aid was first hand because of his son who is a first year student in college.

Counselor 3 requested that I meet him at his office at the school. I had a brief opportunity to observe the interactions of the guidance office receptionist. It was a large reception area with two halls that lead to offices. However, upon his arrival, he greeted me and indicated he had a small walk to his office. He also apologized for his attire, it was casual day. He wore a school spirit shirt, jeans and sneakers. During our walk, I inquired as to why his office was not in the guidance office. He noted the school was designed with suites within each wing to provide immediate services to students without them having to come to a central area. He provided me a tour of a suite. Within the suite was a school counselor, resource person and an administrator. He noted it was a concept from upper administration that they were trying. I asked about staff cohesion. He noted it was not an issue thus far; however, he frequently brings the guidance staff together. For example, he was delayed coming to our appointment because they were having an office birthday breakfast for the guidance secretary. His office was in disarray because he was in the process of relocating his office. The school was modern with a lot of technology. For example, his telephone was visual and audio (he received a call from an administrator during our meeting). He was my last interview. I was not sure if it was my increased comfort level in conducting the interviews or his personality, but this was the most relaxed interview. He was very open and forthright. While he chose his words carefully, he was still charismatic and free with expressions.

Counselor 4 chose to conduct her interview at my office in the evening. Hers was the first interview conducted. Although we had a prior acquaintance, this was our first time discussing her work as a school counselor. She is pursuing a doctoral degree in Counselor Education. This connection coupled with our prior acquaintance provided casual conversation prior to the interview and assisted with the establishment of positive rapport. We sat in close proximity in wing back chairs around a small round conference table. She was professionally dressed in a blazer and dress pants. In addition to serving as the head of guidance she also teaches college level courses. Considering we met in my office and being aware of my position as a Financial Aid Professional, this did not deter from the interview. Further, as a doctoral student, she was aware of qualitative methodology; therefore, my positionality with the phenomena during the interview did not become a limitation of the study in reference to this participant. She noted first-hand experience with admissions and financial aid because her daughter is a first year college student.

Counselor 5 opted to meet at the practice where he provides counseling services. He travels to his school so we met closer to his residence. We met in a counseling observation room at the practice. The room had a sofa and an end table with a lamp (soft lighting). I sat on the sofa and Counselor 5 sat in a chair. He was dressed business casual: sweater, dress slacks and loafers. We began the interview. During the interview, he spoke about his interview with his principal and how this is the only school that he has worked as a school counselor. He mentioned that some of his knowledge about financial aid comes from first-hand experience during his days as a student.

In telling their stories about their counseling experiences, three of the participants indicated their current school is the only school in which they have worked as a counselor. Counselor 5 stated, *“I’m six years on the job; this is where I began my work as a school counselor”*. An entry in my field notes indicated a researcher observation of intrigue in the fact that four of five participants had longevity in the profession and at one school.

Identifiable participant information is not disclosed in the research and all information is confidential. Each participant was provided an invitation letter which included a confidentiality statement. Signed letters of consent were not required.

Post-Secondary Education

In an effort to ensure the participants and the researcher were on the same page in regards to the term and definition of post-secondary education, the first question of each interview was “How do you define post-secondary education?” Each participant was clear that post-secondary education is any learning beyond high school which is consistent with the definition provided in chapter one but with more depth. In chapter one post-secondary education was defined as: provisions of formal instructional programs with a curriculum designed primarily for students who have completed the requirements for a high school diploma or equivalent (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

According to Counselor 3, *“post-secondary education to me could be, anything that students or individuals decide to do education wise, outside of post high school graduation; whether it be, say something like a Technical College, where they go and get some sort of certification, or whether they get a two-year degree; or whether folks decide to do four- year; I look at it as learning period; it could be going off into the military;*

some of our kids go straight into work; but the work environment will have educational aspects that they need to do there also.” Similarly, Counselor 2 defined post-secondary education as “Well, obviously we think of, two and four year colleges, but there could be other forms; Education is a lifelong thing; so whether a student goes, directly to a college out of high school; they go to the military or if they go into the workforce; there's always going to be education on the way, they're going to be training for something; yes we focus on, two and four year colleges but also with an emphasis on lifelong learning.” Interestingly, all three of the male counselors referenced military training in their definition of post-secondary education whereas the female counselors only referenced two and four year institutions of higher learning. Counselor 4 indicated, “Post - Secondary Education I feel is any education beyond high school, whether it is, 2 year college or 4 year college.”

THEMATIC FINDINGS

Within their responses to the interview questions and articulating their lived experiences as high school counselors their perspective functional roles regarding the research phenomena were revealed. The interviews of the research participants revealed descriptive definitions of their role in assisting students with post-secondary education. Based on the essence of the transcripts six themes evolved. The identified themes were: counselor role, collaborator role, conductor role, consultant role, counselor confidence and cooperative ideal environment. The reading and re-reading of the transcripts, phrases and keys words prompted a collective definition of each theme. To assist with the understanding of the findings operational definitions of each theme was created.



Figure 4.1 Thematic Findings

Since the themes were derived from the essence of the transcripts in order to supplant researcher bias the dictionary was utilized for operational definitions regarding the thematic roles; however based on the nature of the research utilization of the definition of counselor from ACA was appropriate. The operational definitions of the identified themes will serve for introduction purpose but the lived experiences of the participants will provide the context for the functional role of the theme based on the findings.

The thematic roles are defined as follows:

- Counselor: One who is trained to engage in a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals (ACA, 2012).
- Conductor: A person who guides or directs the performance of others.
- Collaborator: A person that works jointly with others especially in an intellectual endeavor; and
- Consultant: A person who gives professional advice or services.

The thematic findings are evident within the interview transcripts. The data analysis of the transcripts yielded rich textually descriptive functions of the identified themes.

This chapter reflects the depth and richness of the text.

Counselor Role

The participants are high school counselors. Therefore, the role as a counselor is an appropriate theme to be garnered for this study. The professional definition of a counselor is one who is trained to engage in professional relationships that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals (ACA, 2012). Each participant is a certified school counselor. Two indicated in their interview that they are Career Development Facilitators (CDF).

In the role as counselor, participants expressed that college preparedness is a process which begins in the 8th grade and is continual through the 12th grade. They noted college preparation is a process that students may embark upon differently, therefore assuming the role as counselor is befitting. The role as a counselor is evident in the following participant expressions.

COUNSELOR 2: Well, my experience has been, that as a former teacher and as a counselor, if we can help a student; (a) learn how to study, and (b) just simply learn how to learn; then we can prepare them for anything; they come in from middle school, most of them, do not have an idea of what it really means to study; they've been resting on their intellectual laurels... it takes a little more than that; so good study techniques, and good study habits, the discipline that's involved and all that, we try to instill that in them; and of course, some do get it, some don't; but, if we can help them learn those things then I think that makes them successful

COUNSELOR 3: it really gets individualized; because different students need different things from me; that's something I realized a long time ago; and depending upon the nature of the student..... it really depends upon, what the student really needs from me, per say; and really, you'll kind of get a sense for that the longer you work with them; which is why we do Alpha as oppose to Grade Level; it gives us an opportunity to watch the maturation process and gives us a chance, an opportunity to get to learn and know the students better, because I've always been real big on relationships; and without the actual relationship, there's no vested interest.

The participant continued by discussing interactions with students regarding the Individual Graduation Plans (IGP):

COUNSELOR 2: We start with our 9th graders because of the EEDA (Education and Economic Development Act) and the Individual

Graduation Plans; hopefully they've planned according to their interest and their future educational career goals; of course, as we know, young people always change their minds and we tweak those continually; with their course of study, in high school, and we try to tailor that, according to their personal interest and their strengths and abilities; and then adjust it accordingly;

Participants also noted utilizing career counseling skills and classroom guidance in the role of counselor.

Counselor 4: *Specifically, at my school we have, a Strategies for Success Class, it's basically High School 101; and so our counselors, we go into these classes and we actually do a guidance lesson. The students have to complete a project based on what they want to do after high school. If they say go to college, I have websites that they can actually look at; and so they have to get definite facts; what it takes to get in; what's the GPA, SAT, ACT scores and then the Fun Facts, what's the mascot, you know, what's the school colors and all that kind of stuff, so that makes it fun; they have to either do a PowerPoint or poster board and they present it; so we make that real to them, in the 9th grade.*

Counselor 5: *I'm helping them with decisions on majors; in South Carolina there's legislation in place that allows us to talk about careers and career clusters that we have available in our school; now I'm in a small rural school and we don't have as many career clusters available at our school as maybe some of the bigger schools in the immediate*

metropolitan area would have; but with that aside, we're still able to work on career interest with them; there is software in place in South Carolina; (SCOIS, KUDER) there are places that we can go with our students to at least talk about career ideas....

Further participants shared that they have to meet students where they are developmentally when assisting them.

Counselor 4 I tell them to, think about 4 years from now, the summer of the year they're supposed to graduate, and what are you doing; are you preparing to go to college; have you prepared to go into the military; have you prepared to go into the world of work. Again it does not become real to the student until they're ready to do it...I even tell them, you're planning for two years in one; you're trying to get thru your senior year, you're trying to enjoy your senior year, but you have to plan for next year; you can't just show up at {College} and say, "I'm here"...

Conductor Role

The participants elaborated on their program procedures and practices used to assist students with college preparedness. Within these narratives, the role of conductor was revealed. In this role, a conductor is a person who guides or directs the performance of others. The research participants adorned the role of conductor as revealed in the following statements:

Counselor 3: I may have a high flyer who is pre-destined to go to higher ed; mom, dad knew this without a shadow of a doubt, "Hey, they're going to Harvard", they're self-motivated, and really aggressive, a real go getter; all I may need to do is stay out the way

and just point, and lead and say, "Okay, well here's some resources for you, I need you to do this, I need you to do that; or that particular".

Counselor 5: Well, and they certainly have IGP, the IGP process in the ninth and tenth grade; thru ACT they have a benchmark test for ten graders called the Plan Test that does have a career component on it and; between the Plan and the Career Assessments that we do with them, it gives us an idea of what they may be interested in once they leave high school and we work with them on that throughoutwe find out where they can be educated in these fields {chosen field of study}; so, we're conducting college searches too; We're applying to these schools; we're preparing them to take college Entrance Exams, SAT, ACT are certainly going to be the biggest in the 11th and 12th grades; so, between, the South Carolina Legislation, EEDA and IGP process; college applications, test preparedness, I think that, that's probably the gist of what I do with most of my students.

Some participants noted the un-readiness of students even after being provided the guidance and resources for attainability of post-secondary pursuits.

Counselor 1: When we have senior interviews or we have junior interviews, we talk about, the Individual Graduation Plans our students starting in the 8th grade; although we talk about it each year it especially starts hitting their junior and senior year.

Counselor 4: it never ceases to amaze me of how I'm saying the same thing over; you would think that information that has been told over again, that it would finally be learned, case in point; it never ceases to amaze me, when students come, in their senior year just to graduate from high school, not even prepared for college; and they think you

have to have a foreign language, to graduate; so I have to repeat that and explain that, show it in the book.

Another participant indicated that he conducts reviews of the curriculum to ensure the proper courses are available so that students can take the ones which are required for post-secondary pursuits or will provide them with assistance to obtaining the goal of post-secondary pursuits. *Counselor 3: I'm definitely trying to build that {rigorous course schedule}; I've been working with (a) my AP curriculum; and (b) within my own program; trying to make sure that we can put together a good package. A {Technical College} talked about how they have all these great certifications and how they're looking for students to meet these certain criterion; and how there needs to be a shift in the thought of (a) how the technical aspect is; and (b) how we need to kind of push more students along those lines because that's, right now that is where the jobs are; but, all in all I'd like to say that; we're trying to put out a great product. I would definitely say at my prior school (a) the kids had a wealth of experiences and (b) I felt that they were prepared.*

Collaborator Role

In the role of collaborator, a person works jointly with others especially in an intellectual endeavor; the participants expressed the following lived experiences regarding the collective inner workings in assisting the students with college readiness.

Collaboration with Students

Collaboration with students was noted as being year round and ongoing. The participants expressed working collaboratively with the students beginning with 9th grade orientation in middle school through graduation.

Counselor 2: We let them know up front, from 9th grade on; what they need for high school graduation in South Carolina, what those requirements are; but also what, the four year colleges and the two year colleges are looking for; you always have some students, of course, that wants to go to school out-of-state; and once they let us know that, then we help them {understand how to get there}. Their junior year, when we do registration, we essentially do a Pre-Senior Conference; we check and make sure they've got, all the core classes they need; their foreign languages; those kinds of things; all their lab sciences, make sure they have those in place; plan their senior schedule; then in the fall, we have a Senior Conference we meet with every single senior and hopefully their parents; and we go over all that; in face to face meetings to make sure that those student have done what they need to do or preparing to do so, to get to the next level.

Counselor 3: Yes, yeah; yeah; and programmatic wise, we definitely try to make sure that we do something for everybody in that aspect in year; like for example, right now, we're working with the seniors, making sure that they have what they need; cross checking and cross referencing, you know; posting scholarships.

Counselor 4: Being a counselor, we understand that there's a lot of things they {students} have to know outside of what is taught in the classroom; basically, how to navigate through the system of understanding what the colleges want; what does it take to get into a college and then once given the information, have they absorbed it; so, at my school we actually tell them that every year, during registration conferences but then definitely in the senior year how to actually go through the actual paperwork of applying; getting financial aid; getting whatever scholarships; knowing when to send the

transcripts; knowing when to take the necessary test and just deciding where they want to go and then doing all the necessary components of that.

Counselor 5: With Juniors and Seniors, I am specifically working on them especially hard with college planning; so, see where they are in their particular education; what kind of plans they have for themselves; I'm helping them with applications;, we're doing college searches too; we're applying to these schools; we're preparing them to take college Entrance Exams, SAT, ACT are certainly going to be the biggest in the 11th and 12th grades; so, between, you know the South Carolina Legislation, EEDA and IGP process; you know, college applications, test preparedness, I think that, that's probably the gist of what I do with most of my students; thru using (SCOIS)and IGP we are able to work with underclassmen as well.

Collaboration with Parents

Several participants expressed the importance of parental involvement in assistance with post-secondary educational preparation.

Counselor 1: [chuckling] Oh, the other piece is, a lot of times, I think our parents, unfortunately need to play a bigger part in helping our students get ready for college, because, I feel like the parents think that these students are confident or know what they want and students are just as unsure and just as nervous, just as scared, in preparing for college; a lot of times, unfortunately, our parents take a backseat and they don't guide our students more; and I believe that our parents need to take a bigger part in assisting our students in preparing them or getting them ready and helping them decide what college is best for them.

Counselor 3: *If, I see a scholarship I know one of my kids is destined for, boom, "Hey, come on down to see me, little Joe" boom, or I'll shoot little Johnny up an email; or if I'm debating whether or not little Johnny is going to do what he needs to do, shoot little Johnny's momma an email [laughing] you know, and that way she'll stay on top of it.*

Counselor 4: *Getting the parents' support is definitely important; educating them {on the process and requirements}; getting that education across, to the parents helps in getting that post-secondary information out. Participant four continued to convey how misunderstanding by parents or misinformation from students halts the process and they think information is being withheld. Counselor 4: in no way do I tell the parents, I know it all, when they ask me a question, I say, "Well, let's look at the websites, let's see what's out there" and sometimes seeing the information they understand. I have to say, No I'm not trying to keep your child from getting to college, or actually explaining that technical schools are not all bad. I tell students and parents, it's a wealth of information, its information overload but if you take the time and when you're ready, I think my website has link after link after link that will give you the information you need.*

Counselor 5: *Truly the biggest factor {of college preparedness} to me is home, and the lessons learned in the home; you're not going to have a successful student if they're not taught what they need to know at home first, to respect education; to respect the people that are teaching you; so, obviously, lessons learned at home; the education you're actually received in a school setting; and really, just I think also the importance of making good decisions will also lend well to people becoming prepared for post-secondary pursuits; so home, school and community; I think a healthy dose of the three.*

Collaboration with Others

The participants provided lived experiences of collaboration with others to assist with student success and information dissemination. The participants noted working collaboratively with teachers, school administrators, school nurse and college representatives.

Participant four provided a detailed narrative of collaboration with others.

Counselor 4: *...over the years; I've gotten to the point; where we do reach out and have our teacher's help us. We solicit the teachers to help student retain information, I send the information out to the teachers; and I let them know, Alright you have the seniors is your class, and they may ask you questions, here's the information, this is for you to know; so, in no way, do I say our department can do it alone. I say to teachers, 'Okay, this is what we do; this is how you can help us' instead of making it an us and them thing.* Participant 4 explained in depth examples of students forgetting information from guidance sessions/counseling and in trying to be helpful teachers making inquiries of the school counselors as if information wasn't being shared to students. She noted: *That was a learning curve; trying to actually let the teachers know, that this is what we do; at first it was territorial for me, it was like "what, "what now" and then I actually explained it to the teachers how it actually is {what we do as school counselors}, how we see it, I said, "You teach in your class, you know they don't remember everything, so what if I came to you indicating a student said, "that they were not taught this or that in the class how would you feel" and they {teachers} got it; from that we provide them the same information as the students. Getting the assistance of the teachers and the administrators is beneficial because; I know what I give to the students, I do believe I've got a handle on*

it; but in no way should I keep that information to myself; and it's a lot to know and I just need for the teachers and administrators to know a little bit about what I tell students and what they don't know, I say, "send them back to guidance;" so; it's definitely that comprehensive guidance that works.

Consultant Role

A consultant is a person who gives professional advice or services. It was suggested that exposure to college, college information and collegiate experiences also assist with readiness. The exposure could be in the form of a college visit, attending a college fair or engaging in internet searches regarding institutions of interest. The participants indicated various plans or practices that they utilized to assist students with preparation for life beyond high school in the role of consultant.

Counselor 1: *We try to prepare our parents and talk to them and help them understand that in the next couple of years, it's going to be a big step and big decision for our students and we try to get them involved in the decision making process by handing them as much information as possible; providing workshops for them and answering any questions that they may have about the college process.*

Counselor 2: *We look and see what those schools {colleges of student interest} are requiring; there shouldn't be any student, that leaves [this high school], whose not aware of what's required and the preparation that it takes to get to the next level; virtually, all the information, that they need know is on our guidance webpage; and on our website we have a breakdown of what 9th graders need to do, 10th graders on up to thru their senior year; college, application worksheets are there; we have links to the*

ACT, SAT; we have tutoring sites; we have the links to the SC Commission on Higher Education; FASFA; all those things, everything is there;

Counselor 3: *A student will come to me and say, "What do you think about this" for that type of student I'm more of a resource, to say, "Okay, make sure you do this; here, this is what's coming; stay abreast of this;" for a student who may not be in that same position, I may be more of a, I hate to say, tool or informational tool or resource for them; and also maybe more of a resource for the actual educational process. We talk with them {students} and express importance of how they go about graduation and looking at the bigger picture, and four years is not that long; we just try to make sure we hit them all; and not with just this great grand cookie cutter type of method and say, "Okay, well everybody will go to college" that's not our reality here.*

Counselor 4: *The benefit of actually visiting the schools, I've found that very helpful because, I can actually look at a school and go, "I can see a kid here, I can see a kid here" it helps me give a better suggestion to students; when they ask me a question, I say, "Well, let's look at the websites, let's see what's out there" and I will put that disclaimer out there and say, you know, "I can get you out of High School" after that, we need to talk to an advisor, at the college; we need to call up the admissions office; we need to look at websites; we need to start making some phone calls and I encourage them to do that as well; so, it's an ongoing learning process for me as well as them {student}.*

Counselor Confidence

The theme, counselor confidence, denotes the counselors' self-efficacy regarding precollege counseling. The participants provided insight into their competencies and confidence levels in their ability and activity in precollege counseling in the areas of:

academic, admission and financial aid counseling. They also provided lived experiences regarding when/how these competencies were acquired.

The participants provided insight into their competencies with precollege counseling in response to the following interview questions: How competent do you feel when providing academic counseling for college preparation? How competent do you feel when providing financial aid counseling for college preparation? They provided narratives regarding counseling programs, on the job training, workshops, referrals and communal relationships. They also provided lived experiences regarding when/how these competencies were acquired in response to these interview questions: What competencies did you gain regarding college preparation in your school counselor education program? When did you gain those competencies?

Academic Competencies

Participant noted high levels of confidence in providing academic counseling to assist their students with college preparedness. They noted an understanding of high school graduation requirements, college admission requirements and interactions with colleges and college searches.

Participant responses to how competent they are in providing academic counseling to assist their students with college preparedness are below:

Counselor 3: *That's a good question. Honestly coming right out of the program, I thought I felt pretty good; but it wasn't until I actually started working with some of my more seasoned counselors, that I realized I had so much more to learn and what I would try to do is just learn one aspect of it each year; and so finally it's kind of like, "Oh, okay, I think I've learned a little bit of this, and a little bit of that" because the moment*

you try to become an expert in all of them, is the moment you realized you're really an expert of none; and honestly, I don't profess to be the expert on it; I just know a little bit about a lot of things.

Counselor 1: I feel that I'm very competent, because I have been in the business of helping, assisting students for a long time now; even prior to me, being a counselor myself, I use to help kids in talking about colleges, letting them know that there are colleges out there that can meet their major; I have a great confidence in myself because I have a desire to see kids succeed; I really feel for them because I didn't get the preparation that I needed for college.

Counselor 5: How competent? I think I'm highly competent; now I'm six years on the job, when I started, no, I wasn't; but when you're actually put to the fire in a full-time position, for the very first time, it really takes practical experience to get to where you need to be..... I think I'm highly competent to discuss career situations with students;

Financial Aid Competencies

Participants noted little confidence in providing financial aid counseling. One noted, “I don’t touch it”. Participants responded to how competent they are in financial aid counseling to assist their students with college preparedness. Many expressed a reluctance to address financial and financial aid counseling but had developed relationships with others to ensure students received the appropriate information.

Counselor 1: I feel competent but not as competent as I'd probably like to be; I know about the different types of financial aid offered to students; I know how the students can access them {FAFSA and other applications}. We refer them {students} to Call in College Application Day and College Financial Day. We also have financial aid

night, where we bring in people to talk to them and they offer assistance; so we do refer them to the places they need to go to get assistance in completing that FAFSA.

Counselor 2: *Well, I've got a son, who's a freshmen at [college name]; so I have the first-hand experience and so that's probably the best teacher, we've been thru all that, the FASFA and scholarships applications and helping to understand what Institutional scholarships are verses non-institutional; grants and loans and all those kinds of things; and then of course budget is an important thing too; I'm not a financial counselor, but I can share certainly what I've learned thru experience. We {high school counselors}see ourselves as resources people, obviously; and so, we're very aware of the different types of scholarships and the application process; we have, close connections of course with area colleges; and we have, the Upward Bound Coordinators who are here, once or twice a week; they have helped us with different events in assisting students and their parents in completing their FASFA; and we have the College Application Day; we have some of those folks here, you know to help the students and their parents walk thru the application process; of course, part of that is the financial component; so, we do some of things, at lot of things to offer the students and their families, as much information as possible;*

Counselor 3: *Well, that's something that I definitely try to stay away from, personally; because I know that's not my "bag;" [laugh]what I do is I try to make sure that we bring folks in, where that {financial aid}is their specialty. I'm not going to tell people how to do taxes; knowing that taxes is not my specialty; so that's where we have our special Financial Aid Nights; we make sure we publicize the District Financial Aid Nights; we have folks come in and speak, and tell folks how to pay for college; have folks*

come down and actually walk parents through the actual financial aid process; how to complete that darn FASFA; how to go to the correct FASFA website; you know there are a lot of "bootleggers" out there; so I've always been one if I definitely don't feel confident in something, I have no problem picking up the phone and calling somebody else and say, "Look, hey, how can I get this".

Counselor 4: In no way, do I say that I know that; but, I guess the one thing that college taught me is know where your resources are and know who you can depend upon; so, we have conducted financial aid nights, we understand, sometimes that goes over well, sometimes it does not; we utilize our resources of the community; the little bit that I've picked up on again, I put my disclaimer, and say, "Ah, this is what I know, and I'm going to point you in the direction" now, interesting enough, I tell them, "Your best friend in college is someone in financial aid, someone at the admissions office; and your advisor".

Counselor 5: I am not the best and I know I am not the best; my expertise's in financial aid only come from the standpoint of, I know what it was like when I was a student and what I had to do and what I was able to get; over the course of time, certainly I've become more educated in how things work, because certainly, some things didn't apply to me; we've had financial aid nights, to allow speakers to come in and talk with the students; I can answer a random question, when I need to; but I am much more comfortable referring those questions to outside sources, to colleges, to, you know to people that I know there are financial aid specialists; so I'll do the best I can, but I don't have a problem telling a parent, and say, "Look, I am not the best one to ask, but here's someone who could help

you better". Whether it's the college they're looking into, or the College Goal South Carolina Days. I'm not a financier and I'm not going to talk about interest rates and things like that; I'm not the one to have that conversation with them, those are going to be others.

Competencies Acquisition

The participants had varying perspectives regarding their precollege counseling competencies acquisition. Some of the participants noted obtaining counseling skills in their program of study but precollege counseling skills within their work experiences.

Counselor 2: *Most of, no; [laugh] no, just to be blunt, no; I completed an excellent program, I mean, I loved my professors; I was thrilled to be at [Institution]; but as far as, my coursework, I was trained to be a counselor, and I guess that's probably the biggest gripe most school counselors have, is we've spent so much time doing other things a part from counseling; I mean, we've got a lot of students with substantial needs; I mean, we could all probably spend the entire day doing therapy; but that's not why we're here; most of what we've learned about Post-Secondary Education, preparing students; has been on the job training; you know the College Counselors Workshops, the breakfasts and things and the information we get from the schools, themselves, that's where our education training comes from in regards of preparing them for college; but as far as my coursework and graduate work, Nah, I mean, I can tell you about Albert Ellis and William Glasser.*

COUNSELOR 3: *The program? I would say the program was good for content knowledge; and I would probably say it was really most beneficial when it came down to the theatrical aspect of how you wanted to attack some of the issues*

that the kids came with; but, in regards to dealing with CARENGIE Units, not that much; dealing with OSIRUS, SASSY, Power School, not so much; but no graduate program can adequately address all those things; it's kind of like, one of those things as, they can get the car all nice and shiny, but ultimately you have to learn how to drive that stick; I don't fault them for that; they try to put out the best product that they can, in regards to making sure that they have a foundational background; in regards to theory; in regards to counseling and some research; on those modalities; and basically, those interpersonal relationships which, is ultimate, I think kind of most important because if they {aspiring high school counselors} don't have those core skills then it is difficult to do some aspects of the job. I think that they {graduate program} do try to impart upon us; so in that aspect of it, I would say, it definitely prepared me; and I've been at it awhile to notice the difference between some of these schools that maybe enforce some a little more than others; I hate to say it but you can definitely tell the difference {types of graduate training}; so in that sense, I would definitely say, "Yes;" that I felt prepared, on that level; I was not uncomfortable when the kids came and spoke about a myriad of issues; but learning things that are job specific, there's not, really a way for them {counselor educators} to really do that;

Counselor 4: *(Pause) There was some information in the program, of course, but a lot of it's on the job training, definitely; and until you actually give the information over and over again to a student, and have to give it over and over again, then, you know, it just kind of flows.*

Another noted a combination of practicum and internship experience coupled with on the job training creates the practical experience for competency building. Counselor 5: *What we learned in our graduate program and post graduate program, only just scratches the surface; The program I went thru, absolutely wonderful, top notch; I believed I was very prepared to go into a situation of employment at the school; the thing is this, there are certain things you need to learn in a CACREP accredited program; and yes, we learn those things and we learned those things well; but when we go and try to put this into practice, it's a completely different situation; school counseling is not what's taught in the program; it's just not; and there's not really many clearly define rules for school counselors; it's the practical experience and at the very least in practicum or an internship that we may get some of the it {practice needed}.*

Participant four also expressed a continual learning process: Counselor 4: *It's an ongoing process of learning; our schools takes advantage of the CACRAO Fairs; we take advantage of the College fairs that comes around; we take advantage of the College breakfasts, that's always nice; I myself have gone on the college tours, during the summer; I've encourage my colleagues to actually do that and one has actually done that and see the benefit of actually visiting the schools and I've found that very helpful because, I can actually look at a school and go, "I can see a kid here, I can see a kid here" it helps me give a better suggestion of students; so it's definitely and ongoing process if we take advantage of what the colleges offer us.*

Cooperative Ideal Environment

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." - Albert Einstein"

School counselors are trained that students/clients can be assisted in the helping process through solution focused counseling. In solution focused counseling the “miracle questions” seeks to help the student picture his/her life beyond the problem and envision what life would be like. To obtain the counselors’ perceptions of how their role would be different in assisting students with college preparedness each interview ended with a miracle question. The miracle question was: With unlimited time and resources what would you provide students with in terms of college preparation? I observed various reactions from the participants while answering this question.

COUNSELOR 2: *With [laughing] unlimited resources, I would create my ideal world; I think, in a high school, there should be a counselor for every department; I think there should be a social worker and a psychologist assigned to every school; of course, we have three counselors; we have one social worker for the entire district..... I will start with that, and the more people you have, of course, the more information you can provide. We might have a college and career specialist, right now all three of the counselors are CDFs, we also, have another CDF who shares duties between here and the district office; we need a person who specializes in that {college and career counseling}; so we {counselors} can focus on the individual {student} and classroom guidance; but that college and career person would focus just on that one area, I think that would help, tremendously..... but, because of money and budget cuts, that'll never happen; so we do the best that we can, with what we have; and I'm sure that everyone else is in the same position; we*

are very fortunate with what we do have in place, many other schools don't have nearly what we have; I think we need to be thankful with what we've got; but, we still need to strive for better.

COUNSELOR 5: *If there was unlimited time and resources, there would be someone in my office that was completely dedicated to college and career planning; we don't have that, we're a small school; I really do believe that it is a full-time job in itself; it really is; I believe someone fully dedicated to servicing the students in that particular capacity.*

COUNSELOR 3: *If resources were unlimited, I would really try to individualize it {counseling services} even further; you know what I mean; making sure that, we've provided him/her; the opportunity to maximize where they think they want to go; now, of course, that would involve them, knowing where they want to go; [laugh] which is an ever moving target, so to speak; in that case, you would kind of want to try to provide a holistic not quite so focus; but for the student who was focused, try to make sure that they garnered the experiences and the things that they need or things that the Post-Secondary folks, suggest that they need; so yeah, if money was no option, resources; liability wasn't an issue; and those type things, I definitely would try to individualize it for everyone; which is probably the public schools' biggest problem that we can't do that, you know for everyone.*

SUMMARY

The findings of this study emphasize the pivotal role the high school counselor plays in assisting students with preparation for post-secondary education. Functional roles were uncovered that addressed the research phenomenon. The roles are depicted as

themes. The themes extracted from the essence of the participants lived experiences and identified as the role as counselor, conductor, coordinator and consultant. The participants relayed their competencies in relation to precollege counseling and their ideas of what a miracle school counseling department would entail. Chapter five will provide a discussion of the study results. Also, study limitations, suggestions for future research and implications will be presented in the final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to obtain the high school counselors' perceptions of their role in providing students with college preparedness. The narratives of the school counselors provided rich descriptive information about their perspective roles in assisting students with college preparedness. This chapter summarizes the study by discussing the findings, describing the study's limitations and assumptions, and providing a linkage of previous literature with the study's thematic results. The chapter will also explore the participant self-efficacy as the theoretical framework of the study and recommendations for future actions and research exploration will be made. Finally the researcher's reflections will be presented regarding the study.

OVERVIEW AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

High school counselors provide educational planning and guidance to students which make them a valuable commodity to obtain information for students contemplating their postsecondary options (Hoyt, 2001). In addition to the above mentioned activities, the counselor's roles range from career counseling, therapeutic counseling, academic planning, and financial aid knowledge (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2010). The goal of this study was to discover the specific functional roles of the high school counselor in assisting students with post-secondary educational pursuits by obtaining the school counselor's perspective of their involvement in student college preparedness.

This research was a qualitative study which examined the roles of the school counselor in assisting student preparedness for college. The prevailing research question was: What are the roles of the school counselor in providing students with precollege counseling and assistance? The research participants were five high school counselors practicing in South Carolina high schools. Each participant has five or more years of high school counseling experience. The findings represent the participants' lived experiences extracted from the transcripts of their individual semi-structured interviews. Each participant was asked the following questions during the interviews:

1. What is your definition of post-secondary education?
2. What makes a student prepared for post-secondary education?
3. How do you assist students with post-secondary preparation and at what point in their high school tenure? Why at that particular time?
4. How competent do you feel when providing academic counseling for college preparation?
5. How competent do you feel when providing financial aid counseling for college preparation?
6. What competencies did you gain regarding college preparation in your school counselor education program? When did you gain those competencies?
7. With unlimited time and resources what would you provide students with in terms of college preparation? Are you doing any of these things?

The research findings suggest the participants have a clear understanding of what is necessary for a student to be prepared for post-secondary educational pursuits. This is evident in their responses to the questions regarding defining post-secondary education and what makes a student prepared. The participants indicated that post-secondary education is learning, lifelong learning, consistent learning and ongoing after high school. They expressed that post-secondary education is any learning after high school such as enrolling in two or four year college, attending military, vocational training and on-the-job training. The participants also articulated the ability to differentiate student needs based on their choice of post-secondary pursuits.

LINKAGE OF THEMES AND RELATED LITERATURE

The review of the literature provided information on practices, program reviews, evaluation of services and interventions of school counselors; however, little empirical research on the functional roles of the counselor in assisting students with information, tools and skills needed for post secondary education preparedness. Further, the literature provided little in terms of the counselor's role in understanding of cost, resources, or academic requirements to assist students with making informed decisions as well as ensuring a foundation for post-secondary matriculation. Also, the empirical research found on the phenomena was quantitative with only one qualitative study that was conducted in 1996. This subsection of the chapter will provide a link between prior empirical research and the current phenomenological study.

As noted in chapter two there was a dearth of empirical research regarding the phenomenon. Therefore a search for empirical research regarding the phenomenon was retrieved as early as 1989. In 1989 a quantitative study was conducted by Tennyson,

Miller, Skovholt and Williams to investigate how school counselors in differing structured secondary schools viewed their functions based on the changing role of the counselor as prescribed by ASCA. The study classified counselor guidance services in six broad categories: Counseling, Consulting, Developmental/Career Guidance, Evaluation/Assessment, Management and Administrative Support Service utilizing a 58 item instrument. The findings of the 1989 study indicated slow movement toward adopting the new roles as defined by ASCA and differentials in perceptions regarding the roles between junior and high school counselors. The implications of the 1989 study suggested a “greater awareness among school counselor, counselor educators, and supervisors as to the theoretical orientation of the profession.” (p.402) as defined within the ASCA Role Statement (Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989). Specifically related to this study, the 1989 research noted high frequency in counselor perceived performance and importance in “helping students select post-secondary education and assisting students to explore their career options and planning (p.402)” (Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989). The broad categories used in the 1989 study to examine the “new roles” of the school counselor are reflective of the themes identified in this study. Unlike the 1989 study, the current research suggests high school counselor implementation of the ASCA roles of a school counselor. The thematic roles gleaned from the participant transcripts provided roles that are consist with those established by ASCA; this suggests counselors have accepted the roles and incorporated them into their programs. According to ASCA, “Professional school counselors are certified/licensed educators with a minimum of a master’s degree in school counseling making them uniquely qualified to address all students’ academic, personal/social and career

development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success. (ASCA, 2009)". The participants in the current study are engaged in consultation and collaboration with teachers and conduct classroom guidance. They related post-secondary preparedness to classroom success throughout high school. Counselor 4 stated:

"preparing for Post-Secondary is actually of course, getting thru high school, so we tell them what it takes to actually get in high school and then to eventually; all that is looked at by the colleges from 8th grade, from some students who are taking the Carnegie Units in 8th grade and then 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th; specifically, at my school we have, what is called a Strategies for Success Class, it's basically High School 101; and so our counselors, we go into these classes and we actually do a guidance lesson..... getting the assistance of the teachers and the administrators..."

The participants in both studies thought it was important to engage parents in student development and understood importance of parental involvement to assist the student with preparedness for life after high school. Counselor 1 noted, *"I believe that our parents need to take a bigger part in assisting our students in preparing them or getting them ready and helping them decide what college is best for them"*. This sentiment was echoed by three other participants.

In 1996 Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei (1996) conducted a qualitative study using face-to face interviews with high school counselors to obtain counselors' perspectives on their influence in "guiding students' college plans and the strategies they employ in

advising students in making choices” (p. 259). However, the qualitative study conducted by Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei (1996) yielded results that indicated in counselors’ efforts not to inflict their personal views on students coupled with their unwillingness to provide bad information to students, they created a system of services in which students were not being provided “the information and advice they needed to prepare for their futures” (p. 257). That system included two strategies used in school counseling: encouraging college for all and stressing personal counseling. (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996) Unlike the participants in the 1996 study, the participants in this research appear to have adopted that post-secondary opportunities are available to all students within various forms. Each participant expressed that post-secondary pursuits may include, but are not limited to, two and four year college experiences. Students’ coursework during high school plays an important role in which avenue to pursue. Counselor 4 stated, *“when I’m talking with the student, or whatever, in no way do I tell a student, don’t apply here, don’t apply there, my job is to tell them, this is what the school wants, this is what you have, you have 8 months to get there; now if you run out of time, I don’t think you want to stay here another 3 years, so we need to focus on, what is a good plan for you. Then they hear that, because in no way have I told them Well, it’s 1.5 no, you’re not getting into {College Name} that never comes out my mouth, Okay, this is what you have, this is what {College Name} looks for, now what’d you want to do? and usually they say, ‘Ah, I think I’ll do this’ and we go from there.”*

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) annually provides a report of the State of College Admission which describes key trends in the transition from high school to college. The reports directly relate to this study because its

purpose is to collect information from secondary school counselors via survey about their work responsibilities, particularly in relation to helping students with college access. The findings of this study in context with the NACAC past research have significant correlations within the results. The NACAC survey identified the top four goals of the survey respondents for their guidance programs as: “helping students with their academic achievement in high school; helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary; helping students with personal growth and development; and helping students plan and prepare for their work roles after high school” (p. 31). The identified themes in this study were: counselor role, collaborator role, conductor role, consultant role, counselor confidence and cooperative ideal environment. Within each thematic finding is a lived experience of a participant expressing one of the goals identified in the NACAC survey. The participants have a genuine desire to assist student with post-secondary educational pursuits. However just as the NACAC study revealed, the large caseload of counselors and the desire to be helpers affects their ability to assist students with academic and financial preparedness for college enrollment (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2010; McDonough, 2004). The current study did as well. Participants did not complain or seem frustrated regarding the inability to provide the full range of services, instead, they seem to have adapted and utilized the resources available. As noted in the following participant reflections: *I'm helping them with applications; I'm helping them with decisions on majors; we have to wear many hats in our school, so it's very hard for us to place the emphasis on career awareness of which it deserves, I mean it certainly deserves a great deal, but we're trying to do so many things and we have such a small counseling office, it's very hard to do several things well.* Also, the school statistics of the

participants noted a caseload larger than the ASCA national recommendation. Also gleaned from the transcripts was the notion that with greater time and resources participants would provide students with more individualized attention focused on college preparation.

McDonough and Calderon (2006) contend that within schools, the school counselor is of utmost importance in improving college enrollment because school counselors have impact on various components of college preparation, such as structuring information and activities around student college aspirations and assisting students with academic preparation for college. The purpose of their 2006 qualitative study was to evaluate the perceptual differences between counselors and their students regarding college costs and financial aid. McDonough and Calderon (2006) suggested that timely, informed and reliable advisement regarding college pricing and financial aid availability makes a substantial difference on the pursuit and preparedness for college enrollment. This finding in the study suggests while participants believe college preparation is a process that begins in the 8th grade and is continual through the 12th grade their activities regarding financial preparedness for college is more aggressive in the 11th and 12th grade. Further, all participants expressed reluctance to engage students and parents in the financial aid discussion. Unfortunately, these findings indicate a need for further research to earlier interventions to ensure students are armed with the information to be successful.

Michael Kirst (2004) suggested that counselors are sometimes left as information disseminators instead of agents of one-on-one information to assist with preparation; unfortunately this research confirmed this statement. The findings noted within the

thematic roles revealed that counselors were often resource vessels spouting information, making referrals and not indulging in the conversational depth needed to ensure students received the information. However, the reason for the brief exchange was partially due to lack of competencies in some areas of precollege counseling area. For the most part, the counselors' narratives revealed one-on-one contact with students but not the length of interaction.

REFLECTION ON FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

“People’s level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively the case.”
Albert Bandura

Based on the intent of the study and research method the counseling conceptual framework that was considered in this study was the self-efficacy of the school counselor in relation to their roles in assisting students with college preparedness. The counselors' level of self-efficacy was apparent in their descriptive narratives of precollege counseling and interactions with students who desired to pursue post-secondary educational endeavors. According to Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez and Johnston (2009), self-efficacy in school counseling is the school counselor's “perceived ability to carry out school counseling related tasks” (p. 344) the combined tasks comprise their roles in relation to this study.

Like Holcombe-McCoy et al, the researcher contended that the self-efficacy of the school counselor was key in understanding their role within the school counselor program of providing precollege counseling to students. In this qualitative study, the participants' level of self-efficacy was provided in their reflections. Albert Bandura (1986) explained that self-efficacy is “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the course of

actions required to manage prospective situations." In other words, self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Bandura described these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave, and feel (Bandura, 1986). Each participant expressed with conviction and confidence his or her ability to assist students with post-secondary education.

The participants self-efficacy was high in relation to their "belief" in their capabilities to "organize and execute the course of actions" required to assist students with college readiness (Bandura, 1986). The counselors spoke with pride as they described their guidance programs, conferences, workshops, classroom guidance and interactions with students to assist them with successfully completing high school and pursuing life after college. For example, one participant noted, "Programmatic wise, we definitely try to make sure that we do something for everybody in that aspect."

When asked about their competencies in regards to assisting students with the understanding and preparedness for the academic requirements for post-secondary education the high school counselors expressed knowledge of academic requirements for college, high school coursework and grades needed for admission to various institutions and interactions with students to ensure their actions coincided with their plan for post-secondary pursuits. Participant statements such as the following suggest high levels of self-efficacy: *"I feel that I'm very competent, because I have been in the business of helping, assisting students for a long time .."; "I think I'm highly competent; now I'm six years on the job.."; "I think I'm highly competent to discuss career situations with students..."* Each participant spoke with confidence and passion in reference to assisting students with the tasks associated with college choice, major/career decisions and

navigation through the process. The participants had a clear understanding of the academic requirements for college admission and articulated how they convey this to students.

The participants expressed high levels of self-efficacy in relation to their competencies with assisting students with the financial aspects of college pursuits. However, this was not based on their own ability but having the ability to attain the information from other sources. One participant noted, *“Well, that's something that I definitely try to stay away from, me personally; because I know that, that's not my "bag;" [laughter] okay, so, what I do is I try to make sure that we bring folks in, where that is their specialty.”* This was the reoccurring response regarding financial aid and financial resources counseling. Other statements were similar: *“I know how the students can access them; but when it comes, especially completing the FASFA, I'm not as confident as I'd like to be on that”;* *“In no way, do I say that I know that; but, I guess the one thing that college taught me is know where your resources are”;* *“I put my disclaimer, and say, “Ah, this is what I know, and I'm going to point you in the direction”;* Another counselor explained:

“Well, we know that there is a College Application Day and College Financial Day, we do refer them to that; and then we also have financial aid night, where we also bring in people to talk to them and they offer assistance; so we do refer them to the places they need to go to get assistance in completing that FAFSA.”

In the spirit of consultation and referral, it was clear the participants could articulate how they ensured students received the information; however, only one

participant referenced a need to acquire a working knowledge of the financial aspect of post-secondary educational pursuits.

These findings are comparable to the findings in a study conducted by Bodenhorn, Wolfe and Airen (2010) which posed three research questions of which two questions closely relate to this study. The two questions: (a) Are there relationships between school counselor self-efficacy and the school counseling program approach used? and (b) Is there a relationship between school counselor self-efficacy and the school counselor's perception of achievement gap status and equity in school? The results of the 2010 study confirmed that "school counselors with higher levels of self-efficacy seem to be having a different impact on their students than those with lower levels of self-efficacy (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010). The findings of this study were consistent with the 2010 study, for participants with higher levels of self-efficacy had more detailed activities and resource materials to assist students with college information.

LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS OF STUDY

Limitations and assumptions exist in the study. When designing the study, provisions were taken to reduce limitations that could affect the study. As discussed in Chapter Three, researcher biases were acknowledged, member checking utilized to ensure trustworthiness and peer researcher coding to assist with triangulation of the thematic findings.

The paucity of information and lack of theoretical based research regarding the phenomenon was a limitation of the research; thus the researcher had to draw interferences based on acquired knowledge in academic doctoral course of study and

professional experience, while relaying heavily on the counselors lived experiences described in the study. Based on the researcher's positionality it was understood that the acquisition of complaints maybe a limitation of the study, however this issues did not arise in part due to the utilization of appropriate questions and quickly established rapport with the participants as a listener of their lived experiences.

I also believed the South Carolina legislative mandated responsibilities for guidance programs would serve as a limitation of the study; and provide the potential for the narratives of the school counselors to include scripted information regarding the mandate instead of their actual experiences. The interview questions did not reference the state mandates in hopes that the counselors would express their actual experiences and activities in providing precollege counseling to students. Further, the researcher understood that the mandates provide requirements for the guidance program and the individuals other than the school counselor might provide precollege counseling services to students (Smink, et al., 2010).

The purposeful sample provided for focus depth in the study but limited the range of perspectives across all high school counselors. The study was not intended to be an exhaustive study but generalizable for high school counselor regarding their role in the phenomena being studied.

One limitation of the study was the inability to obtain information from a variety of geographic locations. It was assumed that while the inquiry was statewide it was possible that respondents would be from a centralized part of the state. This assumption was accurate. Further, while this geographic area provided the opportunity to obtain school counselor experiences from a wide variety of socio-economic school based

communities and multiple districts, there was the potential for exclusion of representation from rural areas. This assumption was incorrect. Two participants were from rural areas with similar school demographic information. Another limitation was both female participants were African American, females from other racial groups were not represented in the study; therefore, there was no diversity in female study participants.

An unexpected limitation was the ability to obtain participants for the study. While the intent was to have 5-7 participants, an acceptable number for this type of qualitative research (Glesne, 2011). The researcher anticipated more than 9 responses from the 32 email requests for study participation; considering the researcher is a doctoral candidate at a premier research institution with a CACREP accredited Counselor Education, Education Specialist program.

Another limitation was the need to obtain school district approval for participation in the study from two school districts with high schools which met the criteria to participate in the study. However it was later revealed that most of the emails of inquiry were sent to school counselors where district approval was required. One counselor informed me of this requirement. I sought to obtain district approval with the following results: One school district with five high schools required the completion of a research proposal application. The application would be submitted to the research proposal committee with an application process of eight weeks. Based on the study timeline district approval was not sought. Another school district with nine high schools required district approval; however, after several unsuccessful attempts in contacting the Accountability Specialist, it was concluded that participants from this district would not

be accessible for the study. Obtaining additional participants would have widened the diversity of the participants and schools to increase the generalizability of the study.

A research assumption was that the South Carolina's Personal Pathways to Success Initiative, authorized under the state's EEDA in 2005 would have an effect on participant responses. As a result, the participants would have a wealth of information regarding the phenomenon because the mandate prescribed responsibilities of school counselors regarding their roles in assisting students with college preparedness. However, the mandate could also serve as a limitation due to the potential for scripted responses based on the requirement that certain actions or initiatives should be occurring based on the legislative prescription. The assumption was accurate however the mandate did not serve as a limitation. Each participant was aware of the EEDA and expressed their roles and activities in their own voice.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

The results are the collective experiences of the participants' perceptions of their roles in assisting students with college preparedness. The findings have transferability to assist school counselors in competencies needed to enhance or embrace the role needed to assist students' preparedness. The findings have implications for counselor educators, school counselors and professionals in higher education.

Implications for Counselor Education and School Counseling

The results suggest additional competencies in precollege counseling would be beneficial for aspiring school counselors. Each participant noted little acquisition of precollege counseling in relation to academic and financial aid knowledge needed to assist students with preparation. However, each participant was aware and utilized

resources as a means of keeping students informed. However, resources do not eliminate the need for self-knowledge.

In designing the study, the researcher noted that counselor educators may utilize the information from the study to incorporate a lesson or guest speaker during the practicum or internship process to provide aspiring school counselors the necessary information to facilitate awareness and set the foundation for building competency on available resources for college, admission requirements and college retention techniques. A participant expressed the exact sentiment. Counselor 5 noted: *it'd be nice to be able to offer some real life applications; maybe getting, practicing school counselors in as guest speakers in class, might help for better understanding; A textbook is only going to do so much; that's a lot about, theories, you know the science of counseling; I think there's some things that could be put in place to make the experience much more impactful for what they're going to anticipate when they actually get jobs; he expressed he from time to time visit the classes at the request of former professors to provide a "real world experiences" discussion with future school counselors. He tells them "Look, you know, you're going to get a wonderful education here, but it's not everything, let's talk about what you're really going to expect when you get to the school that you may be working in" .*

Implications for Professionals in Higher Education

It was anticipated that obtaining a descriptive narrative of the school counselor's experiences would assist with the definition of their role and their preceived competencies about college readiness components. The findings of this study in context with past research have signifciant implications regarding how professionals in higer

education can assist school counselors in assisting students with post-secondary pursuits. McDonough (2004) noted “the barrier to college access are primarily financial and academic” (p. 13), she contends that more and better trained counselors in the areas of college preparation and available financial resources could assist with deconstruction of the barriers and improve equality for post-secondary educational pursuit. The participants in this study resoundingly noted a dependency on college administrators for information regarding admission requirements and financial aid. Working collaboratively with these professionals to stay abreast of requirements and serve as referrals for students and parents appears to be significant.

In chapter 1, I noted as the researcher I am also a member of the financial aid profession therefore the results have double impact for reference. Just as the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is vested in the services provided by school counselors so is the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA). Each participant referenced, while incorrectly using terms, the College Goal South Carolina sessions held on Saturday throughout the State to assist students and their families with FAFSA completion. They noted conducting high school financial aid nights; however only one participant indicated who conducts their nights, but each State Financial Aid Association has representatives that will conduct nights for free. They will also provide sessions at school counseling conferences to help keep school counselors informed of the complex world of financial aid. Both professions, school counseling and financial aid, have the same end desire that financial constraints not be a barrier for college pursuit of our youth. Members of the financial aid profession

can utilize the findings as a means of providing services to school counselors to assist with competencies regarding financial aid resources for students.

The purpose of this study was to obtain the stories of the school counselors relating to their role in preparing students for post-secondary education. Conducting the research and sharing the findings will assist with closing a financial divide by increasing access to college education through student preparedness and therefore potentially improving economic empowerment of more Americans.

Knowledge Generation

According to McDonough (2004) “the barrier to college access are primarily financial and academic” (p. 13) she contends that more and better trained counselors in the areas of college preparation and available financial resources could assist with deconstruction of the barriers and improve equality for post-secondary educational pursuit.

This research provide what factors, if any, school counselors and other school officials play in assisting students with preparedness for college. The research confirmed that earlier interventions are needed to ensure student are armed with the information to be successful. The research also provided information regarding the gaps in competencies needed to ensure counselors can assist students with college readiness.

Professional Application

The findings have transferability to assist school counselors in competences needed to enhance or embrace the role needed to assist students’ preparedness and ensure all students are provided appropriate information regarding access to college.

Counselor educators can utilize the information to incorporate assignment and activities in the course syllabus, include guest speaker specialized in admission requirements and financial aid eligibility. During the practicum or internship process training and outreach can be provided in these areas to provide aspiring school counselors this information to facilitate awareness and set the foundation for building competency on available resources for college, admission requirements and college retention techniques. One participant noted how he returns to the classroom to provide aspiring counselor information specific to being a school counselor as a means of sharing real life experiences as teachable moments.

Social Change

The acquisition of this information has the potential to assist with college enrollment and retention for obtaining post-secondary education. According to McDonough (2004) improving counseling in schools with students and families for college preparation would have a significant bearing on college access for low income, rural and urban students as well as students of various racial/ethnic origins (McDonough P. M., 2004). The participants expressed their collaborative efforts to ensure students and their families are aware of career opportunities, earning powers for various careers and educational attainment necessary for reaching career goals. Equipping students with accurate information is an effective strategy for assisting with the reduction of the barriers related to college access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion of the results, several recommendations for action and future research grew from this study.

Recommendations for Actions

The findings suggest that additional resources are needed to actively engaged in successful enforcement of the South Carolina's Personal Pathways to Success Initiative, authorized under the state's Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) in 2005, which is the state-mandated school reform model designed to improve student achievement and preparedness for post-secondary education. Many of the counselors referenced the legislation and its utilization in their work experiences with assisting students. I observed subtle shifts in their tones when discussing the mandate but no negative commentaries regarding the practice. Only one participant made a snide remark in reference to the IGPs "*those darn IGPs*" but later clarified that the IGPs are a useful tool in understanding the students' interests and creating a plan for carrying out the plan. Another counselor noted that the mandate provides an opportunity for them to actively participate in career counseling because it is required. However, it was apparent that resources are not sufficient for the participants to fully implement. Counselor 5 noted: "*we have to wear many hats in our school, so it's very hard for us to place the emphasis on career awareness of which it deserves, I mean it certainly deserves a great deal, but we're trying to do so many things and we have such a small counseling office, it's very hard to do several things well; you can only do, maybe a couple of things well and everything else, is just, you know, barely adequate or you know, just something along those lines.*" In response to the last question Counselor 5 reiterated: "*If there was unlimited time and resources, there would be someone in my office that was completely dedicated to college and career planning.*"

The research suggests that high school counselors may need to increase their working knowledge of State funded scholarships and grants and more actively pursue informing students, parents, teachers, administrators and the community about the requirements for state funded scholarships and grants. According to Lee and Ekstrom (1987) school counselors have access to academic records and scholarship standards and can begin to inform students about the processes as early as middle school to ensure that they aspire for attainment (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987). While many of the participants expressed a general knowledge about the South Carolina legislatively funded grants and scholarships, their school statistics, disproportionately indicate student eligibility for the South Carolina Legislative Incentive for Future Excellence (LIFE) Scholarship with student eligibility ranging from 30-70%. The LIFE scholarship is awarded to South Carolina residents, graduating from an in-state high school with a 3.0 grade point average (gpa) on the uniformed state grading scale the award is \$5,000 annually. Eligible students can receive the award at a two or four year institution. There are additional ACT/SAT requirements for four-year schools; however, if a student does not meet those they can receive the HOPE scholarship based on meeting the gpa requirement. This could be indicative of the students not being aware of how their academic record affects eligibility, and therefore not maintaining sufficient gpa. It could also be reflective of the participants competencies regarding financial aid resources. Interestingly, the participants with the higher percentage of LIFE eligible students also expressed extensively, how they use technology, guidance webpage and conferences with students regarding college preparedness. Counselor 3 stated: *we've build up the website as best we can....we take advantage of technology....., I have websites that they can actually look*

at; and so they have to get definite facts; what it takes to get in; what's the GPA, SAT, ACT scores.....I remind students from 8th on, take advantage of your guidance's webpage, and not only my webpage but other guidance's Webpages.

Recommendations for Future Studies

One recommendation for a future study would be to conduct a mixed method study to ascertain the self-efficacy of the high school counselor utilizing an instrument designed to measure the self-efficacy of the school counselor along with conducting a focus group and/or interviews regarding functional roles of the school counselor in order to conduct a casual comparison of the self-efficacy with the counselors' depiction of their work in precollege counseling. In 2005 Bodenhorn and Skaggs developed a School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSES) to assess the self-efficacy of the school counselor. The SCSES is an instrument with 43 items designed specifically for school counselors based on their unique function and position in schools (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, Development of the School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale, 2005). The SCSES was used in a quantitative study to determine if the level of school counselor self-efficacy affected their choice of school counselor programs to assist with addressing the achievement gap of students (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, School Counselor Program Choice and Self Efficacy: Relationship to Achievement Gaps, 2010). A quantitative study conducted by Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez and Johnston (2009) examined school counselor disposition, which included counselor self-efficacy, as a predictor for data usage in counseling programs; these researchers created an instrument to assess self-efficacy. The findings of their study suggested that there were two dispositions related to data usage and one was school counselor self-efficacy (Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, & Johnston, 2009). Either

study could be replicated using various functional roles of the high school counselor and obtaining self-efficacy from either instrument. A causal comparison would be beneficial to school counselor professional practices.

Conducting a study utilizing high school counselors with fewer than five years of experience would be beneficial because these individuals may be able to correlate competencies with course work or academic activities from their program of study. In this study the researcher wanted lived experiences of the participants therefore individuals with five or more year of experiences was needed to obtain rich descriptive information. However, these participants equated their competencies related to the phenomena based on the job training and workshops. They noted positive attributes of their programs however rarely linked their competencies with the research phenomenon with academia. It would be beneficial to obtain the experiences of individuals with fewer than five years of experience and if the findings also suggest limited competencies acquired in the program of study then counselor educators would have reason to incorporate more into course work.

A longitudinal study is underway regarding the effectiveness of the SC legislative mandate but the elements directly related to this study are not yet available. However various components of the mandate could be investigated in the interim, such as the utilization and effectiveness of IGPs by conducting a:

1. qualitative or quantitative study with students who completed the first IGPs and advancement/completion of post-secondary education in relation to the IGPs created in the 8th grade;

2. study investigating the effectiveness of the mandate on the percentage of students who pursue post-secondary education since its enactment;
3. study on how/if the mandate changed the perception of the school counselor with the community, parents and administrators;
4. qualitative study to identify the effectiveness of the mandate from the perspective of high school students regarding the utilization and reference of the IGPs throughout their high school tenure and their interactions with the school counselor.
5. qualitative study with middle/high school counselors regarding their perception of the effectiveness of the use IGPs within the counseling program.

Since South Carolina is one of few states to have such a legislative mandate, possibilities for obtaining empirical data regarding the research phenomenon are endless and would have a significant effect on the school counseling profession.

Further, conducting a study investigating the reason for the reluctance of high school counselors to engage in conversations about financial aid resources or financial counseling in relation to college preparedness would be beneficial. According to McDonough and NACAC (2006) school Counselor development in the area of financial aid is especially critical. “While 86 percent of schools rely on school counselors to provide students information about financial aid, 76 percent of counselors reported needing more support and training to provide financial aid advice “(McDonough P., 2006, p. 5). Based on positionality of the researcher of this study in regards to understanding financial aid, it is recommended that school counselor have at a minimum the following:

1. Knowledge of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
The FAFSA is the core application to all Federal Title IV financial resources.
2. Knowledge of the eligibilty requirements for the state funded scholarships and grants. Have readily accessible the requirements in a brochures, handout or the web resource for dissementation to students continually throughout advisement to assist with .
3. Have a primary contact with a financial aid adminstrator at an area college or univeristy. Eligibility and guidelines are typically universal therefore if they cannot assist you they can provide an appropriate referral.
4. Take advantage of financial aid training. Request that financial aid professionals present at school counseling association conferences, in-service and conduct financial aid nights. Remember to utilize free resources whenever possible. Students and parents should not have to pay for this assistance or be encouraged to pay for these services.

RESEARCHER'S REFLECTION

"We have an obligation and a responsibility to be investors in our students and our schools. We must make sure that people who have the grades, the desire and the will, but not the money, can still get the best education possible." President Barack Obama

The research topic was chosen because of the researcher's relationships of working with families in secondary school settings, participation in educating school counselors, training financial aid professionals, and professional responsibilities to help families obtain financial resources for post-secondary education.

In a qualitative study, field notes are a method for the researcher to render a descriptive and analytical report of the people, things, places, activities, occurrences and conversations (Glesne, 2011). I maintained descriptive and reflective field notes as a means of keeping an account of my interactions with the participants. I also utilized the notes to monitor my subjectivity. During conversations with participants, I had to refrain from the use of financial resource jargons, acronyms and higher education talk. I also had to seek clarification when the participants used terms that I was not familiar with. For example, I was familiar with SCOIS and the Plan, but not OSIRIS, which is the integrated software used by one of the districts. Initially, I was uncomfortable asking for clarification for fear that it was a term that I should have been aware of; however, none of the participants seemed to mind or question my inquiry for clarification.

My recollection going into the research was that I would have difficulty remaining objective because my personal belief was that sufficient information may not be disseminated equally across and within racial and socioeconomic areas. This issue was not revealed in this study.

The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analyzing phenomenological research as defined by Moustakas (1994) was used in this study. The modified version allowed for a rich depiction of the lived experiences of the participants in relation to the research phenomena. I utilized the six steps for data analysis of this study as described by Creswell (2007). The first step was providing a detailed description of the researcher's personal experience with the phenomenon under study in chapters one and three. The results are the researcher's best understanding, without interpretation, of the essence of the participants lived experiences.

While the research literature and information suggested the school counselor is important to student college readiness, there was a paucity of information on the specific role of the school counselor and how they effectively perform the function. I chose to conduct the qualitative study to examine the roles of the school counselor in assisting students with preparedness for college because this was a phenomenon that needed discovery. I believe the study revealed some of the functional roles of the school counselor within the six themes extracted from the participant experiences.

Summary

The researcher agrees that school counselors play an important role in preparing students for post-secondary education and counselors are often the primary, if not the only, resource students have to access the information and materials needed to pursue post-secondary education (McDonough & Caledron, 2006; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011). This phenomenological study sought to discover the specific functional roles of the high school counselor in assisting students with post-secondary educational pursuits by obtaining the school counselor's perspective of their involvement in student college preparedness. The results were the collective experiences of the participants' perceptions and meanings of their role in assisting students with college preparedness. Data collection and utilization of appropriate methods of analysis was conducted in accordance with qualitative study design. The results revealed six themes which identified how school counselors may successfully assist students with the launch from high school to post-secondary pursuits. The identified themes were: counselor role, collaborator role, conductor role, consultant role, counselor confidence and cooperative ideal environment.

Overall, the results revealed how the thematic findings are utilized to provide assistance to students with college readiness. The findings can lead to a better understanding of the phenomena and provide transferable information for potentially assisting others in similar settings. The information is useful for counselor educators and college professionals to assist school counselors in meeting the needs of students who desire to pursue post-secondary education.

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APPENDIX A
INVITATIONAL LETTER

Tabatha McAllister
USC College of Education
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October 2012

Title of Study: School Counselors' Perception of their Role in Assisting Students with
College Preparedness

Dear High School Counselor,

My name is Tabatha McAllister. I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my doctorate degree in Counselor Education and Supervision, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying Counselor Education and Supervision. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a demographic survey and meet with me for an interview regarding your role as a high school counselor. In particular, we will discuss your role in helping students with preparation for post-secondary education. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 90 minutes. The session will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by members of the research team who will transcribe and analyze them. They will then be destroyed.

Although you probably won't benefit directly from participating in this study, we hope that others in society in general will benefit by understanding the roles as a school counselor is assisting students with post-secondary educational pursuits.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at (803-777-9451 and mcallisv@email.sc.edu) or my faculty advisor, (Dr. Kathy Evans, 803-777-1937 and kevans@mailbox.sc.edu) if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at the number listed below to discuss participating.

With kind regards,

Tabatha McAllister

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your definition of post-secondary education?
2. What makes a student prepared for post-secondary education?
3. How do you assist students with post-secondary preparation and at what point in their high school tenure? Why at that particular time?
4. How competent do you feel when providing academic counseling for college preparation?
5. How competent do you feel when providing financial aid counseling for college preparation?
6. What competencies did you gain regarding college preparation in your school counselor education program? When did you gain those competencies?
7. With unlimited time and resources what would you provide students with in terms of college preparation? Are you doing any of these things?

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Counselor #_____

1. Gender: _____Male _____Female
2. Number of years as a School Counselor: _____
3. Number of years as a High School Counselor: _____
4. What is the number of students that attend post-secondary Education? _____